The Memoirs of Madam Nguyen Hac Dam Thu - Part One - From War to Peace

The Memoirs of Madam Nguyen Hac Dam Thu

FROM WAR TO PEACE

Hanoi 2019

Part One – An obsession with war

One: My escape

While sitting quietly in my airplane seat, my safety belt fastened, I reviewed in my mind the dramatic events of the past year.

In the preceding year I had reached the age of eighteen. I remembered the day of 17th December 1952 when, during a biology class, in the final year at the Nguyen Trai Lycée, I was called in by the headmaster. He was in a state of panic. Immediately I thought that the secret service of North Vietnam had ordered my arrest. I was mentally prepared. I was not even very surprised since for the past three years I had been involved in the secret resistance movement of Hanoi schoolchildren and thus knew that any one of us might be arrested at any moment, despite all the precautions we had taken. The policemen escorted me in one of two jeeps that sped towards my home at 55 boulevard Phan Chu Trinh.

My mother was talking to my aunt near the balcony of the room that looked out on the garden path. She was very taken aback to see me escorted by unknown men during school time. The policemen divided into two groups. Five of them stayed outside, surrounding the house, preventing anyone from entering or leaving. I followed the remaining policemen straight into the room that I shared with my mother and which also served as the study for my elder sister and myself. They searched the room with all the fury of

hunting dogs after their quarry. What an uproar! They turned everything upside down, books, exercise books, clothing etc. They also entered the adjacent room. I calmly tried to intervene, saying:

“That is my cousins’ room. I hope that you will tidy things up before you leave.”

I knew perfectly well that they would do no such thing, but needed to make clear that that room was not ours.

One of the policemen looked at some photographs in a small case.

Dam Thu’s brother and sister. Hanoi 1950

Dam Thu’s brother and sister. Hanoi 1950 One photograph was of my cousin Hong Phan who is two years my senior. After her time in prison, she knew that she could not stay in Hanoi. Hong Phan was the daughter of my aunt Vuong; my father’s sister and we were very close. She had been arrested two years earlier, on the day when the students of Trung Vuong College were celebrating victory in the frontier battles of Cao Bang, Bac Kan and Lang Son with pamphlets and firecrackers and even a red flag with a yellow star raised over the first-floor window of the college. It was part of a re-enactment in November 1950 (one month after the Viet Minh victory). The reprisals at Trung Vuong College were severe.

Among the students in this photo, eight were arrested and tortured by the North Vietnam Security Service after celebrating the victory in the frontier provinces of Cao-Bac-Lang in October 1950 by raising the red flag with the yellow star and setting off firecrackers in the halls of Trung Vuong College.

Among the students in this photo, eight were arrested and tortured by the North Vietnam Security Service after celebrating the victory in the frontier provinces of Cao-Bac-Lang in October 1950 by raising the red flag with the yellow star and setting off firecrackers in the halls of Trung Vuong College. Hong Phan was in the second year at Chu Van An Lycée and in charge of the underground resistance at Trung Vuong College. Hong Phan was among sixteen students arrested one after another, either at home or at the college, over a period of several days. All of them were violently tortured with electric shock treatment.

In the end, Hong Phan had tried to commit suicide by opening a vein in her arm after protesting the torture and insisting that her friends be let go. She insisted that she alone had been responsible for the celebration of the Viet Minh military success in the frontier provinces. Her life was saved in the Yersin Hospital (now known as the Viet Duc Hospital). This incident attracted a lot of attention in Hanoi. The students and school children in various universities and lycées planned a strike. Faced with this alarming development, the Governor of the North ordered that all the students from Trung Vuong College be released, but that Hong Phan should be kept under guard at the Hoa Lo Central Prison.

Since Hong Phan was still a minor (aged 17) she was released after two months imprisonment at the Central Prison and put under the responsibility of her mother, while being expelled from the Chu Van An Lycée. She had left for the liberated zone four months ago and had sent me a letter describing her adventures and her journey. Fortunately, this letter was

hidden under the dust jacket of a book. I thought that the policeman might be on our side. Nonetheless a real snitch wanted to see the case. The other man put him off by indicated with a gesture that he had already checked it. I showed them another shelf of books in the opposite room, but the men outside were urging them to leave as they had other houses to search. Since it was close to the 6th anniversary of the 19th of December 1946 Uprising, the police had launched a general round-up. Although they had found no suspicious documents, they took everything with them anyway. My mother was extremely worried when the police told her that she needed to prepare a duvet for me to spend the night.

Thus, I became a prisoner. I was nonetheless at peace since my copies of the *Tien Phong* newspaper and a petition for the release of the attorney Nguyen Huu Tho who had been deported to Lai Chau, with the signatures of some ten of my friends, had not been found. I had hidden them in a corner under a pile of shoes and dusty boots.

In the jeep on the way to the security service of North Vietnam's offices at 87 Tran Hung Dao Boulevard, I asked myself why I had been arrested. One of the policemen asked why my fellow schoolgirl Toan had copies of the *Tien Phong* newspaper, but I did not?

In this manner I learned that Toan, who was one of our trio of friends, had been arrested. She was three years older than I. Her father had been murdered by the French when they had occupied her family's village near Hanoi. In 1946 he had been the head of the People's Committee. I was certain that she would not betray me.

Upon arrival, I was taken to a room where a Eurasian with curly hair and a cunning look did the interrogations. He gave me a form to fill in my personal details. He expressed astonishment that I had passed the first part of the baccalaureate at the age of 17. Since I left the "reason for arrest" blank on the form, he told me to write: "Resistance activities."

"But why? What have I done?"

"You will see" He took up the electrodes and I knew that he would attempt to force me to confess just as my friends in the College told me had happened two years before.

"If you electrocute me, I cannot be held responsible for what I say…"

He slapped me in the face so hard that I shook. I felt dizzy and my ears rang.

"Don't you understand?" he yelled. "There is no discussion here. Just do what you are told."

“So here the torture begins” I thought to myself, as the electric shocks passed through my body. My body shook and I cried out in pain.

Then the interrogator took a letter out of a drawer and said: “Who wrote this letter?”

I knew my own handwriting straight away. I had written the letter to the medical students in the liberated zone in Viet Bac, telling them about our supporting activities for the Resistance in the heart of Hanoi. Also, I had signed it with a pseudonym as the representative of the Trung Vuong College students. Thus, the contents were neither treasonous nor confrontational. No point in denial. I told him that I had written the letter.

“It has taken us two months to find out whose handwriting this was. So now we need your statement.”

“Give me some paper” I said in a neutral tone, thinking that thus I might avoid more torture.

He assented with a nod of his head and gave me several sheets of paper. I heard him mutter: “More common sense than bullshit.” I said to myself: “So Toan hasn’t said anything yet. So much the better for that.”

I started to write about my childhood and my adolescence in the loving care of my mother, that my hobby was reading, that I was always hard-working and obedient in class, excelled in Literature and that my mother watched over my friendships with others…I had almost finished the first page when the interrogator who had moved behind me cast an eye on the page and… bang…struck me on the top of the head with a copper ruler.

“Irrelevant” he shouted.

The blow to my head was really painful…I put down the pen and put my hands over my head, afraid that I might have a fractured skull. Fortunately, the bell rang at that moment. It was the end of the day’s work. The interrogator swiftly filed the documents in a drawer. Another policeman came in. This man took me into the adjacent room where he removed my hair clasps and my belt, as these could be used as a means of a suicide attempt. Then I was taken to the main gate of the prison. The policeman told the jailer:

“Put her in an empty cell and don’t allow her to communicate with the other schoolgirls”.

They led me across a large courtyard and put me in a cell where an old woman was seated on the ground. The cell was about two meters by three and had two iron benches against the walls, which were streaked with black tar.

I spent a sleepless night going over the circumstances of my arrest and wondering how to defend myself. Under all circumstances it was vital to preserve our secret network which I had taken so much trouble to build. I was in charge of about a dozen schoolgirls in the three years below mine at Trung Vuong College. We had all escaped reprisals at the end of 1950. We distributed songs and newspapers from the liberated zone. Next, we had had a newsletter of our own secret League of Hanoi Schoolgirls for the Resistance called *Nhua Song* (*The Sap of Life)* which we printed on a roneo machine. It was the voice of the young people in Hanoi who were against the recruitment of young men into the officer corps of Bao Dai's army. In reaction we sent sweaters knitted by ourselves to our solders at the front, we sold war bonds to those who supported the Viet Minh, we edited our newsletter and distributed it to sympathizers and so on.

After the reprisals of the end of 1950, we took quite a number of precautions and wrote false announcements to deflect the suspicions of the secret police in case any of us should be arrested. To my knowledge, most of our members had siblings and cousins in the Resistance. All of us wanted to be involved in the effort to achieve Independence and Liberation and we knew how to keep secrets in order to protect our underground work. It was only Toan, who lived alone with her nearly blind mother, who had not taken certain precautions and had anyway only joined our cause about a year before. I knew that in this case I alone could take responsibility. So, I made up the following story: Hong Phan had given me a book to pass on to an unknown young woman who was to visit me about two months after her departure for the liberated zone. It was this girl who had asked me to write up her draft of a letter on account of my good handwriting…I knew nothing more. I tried to learn this version by heart. It was a long night indeed, but I had no desire to sleep. In my cell I turned over these thoughts as I suffered the attacks of the blood-sucking mosquitoes.

The following day, when it was still dark, all the prisoners were let out into the courtyard where a large basin full of water and taps were available for washing. Fortunately, I ran into Toan and, while we hid behind the basin, I explained to her my version of events. According to this we agreed on the made-up courier introduced by Hong Phan and on the fact that we did not know each other and that the contact with the courier only happened two months after Hong Phan's departure. Toan had also been arrested for what she had written, in addition to which they had at her home found underground newspapers and passports to the liberated zone for deserters who wished to avoid recruitment into the army.

Each of us was obliged to act in a manner that would make this version of events plausible and to promise that we would change no aspect of the story under interrogation, that the meetings with the courier had been in the park and not at our homes. We were obliged to maintain the rule of secrecy and to refrain from giving the names of others to the police.

The interrogations went on over a period of three days, with Toan and I separated. On the second day the policemen changed. Among the new ones was Fat John, a burly Eurasian known for his cruel torture of prisoners – he tortured me psychologically. He had given prolonged electric shocks to a young man who had had a banner emblazoned with the slogan VICTORY TO THE RESISTANCE and a photograph of President Ho Chi Minh in his home. With every sound of the crank, we got a charge of electricity which caused convulsions in the victim. I gripped the edge of the table with my hands in an attempt to offset the convulsions. Certainly not out of fear, but out of empathy for the tortured young man. Deep down in my mind I was boiling with anger. Our underground work was for peace and to support the government of President Ho Chi Minh in his negotiations. Not for war. And yet we suffered appalling torture.

I filled the paper with the version of events already written in my head. They showed me a photograph of Hong Phan holding a plaque with a registration number in front of her chest. An arrogant police officer nodded as he looked at the banner and the portrait of Ho Chi Minh and sneered:

“Ha, ha, ha! You are organizing your anniversary celebrations for the Resistance right here”.

Then he tapped his finger on my letter and said:

“Have you come to prison to hate the invader? Ha, ha-ha!”

“We should abolish the use of the name of the Trung Sisters by Trung Vuong College otherwise the stubborn students will always follow their example.”

“You will spend your youth in prison,” said another.

I thought to myself: he really knows that we are working for a just cause. He spoke of the Trung Sisters who heroically repelled the invasion of the Han Empire in 40 A.D.

The policeman continued: “Even the pins and the postcards are made in France and yet you talk of independence.”

Oh my God, I thought. The true story of the fake independence of Bao Dai is revealed by these men who believe that might is right.

On the morning of the second day the police summoned Hong Phan's mother, my aunt Vuong. They asked her how she could have let Hong Phan escape when she was responsible for her. My aunt replied that Hong Phan was now 19 and thus alone responsible for her actions. At noon they put my aunt into the cell adjacent to mine where Hong Phan had attempted suicide two years prior. The jailor told Aunt Vuong what had happened. He had been the one in charge of Hong Phan. During four days of interrogation, she didn't say a single word. On the fifth day they delivered a sheet of paper along with her bowl of soup, urging her to write her confession. Hong Phan had written a final letter to the authorities complaining bitterly about the torture, then she smashed the bowl and used the shards to lacerate the vein in her arm…the jailor had been appalled to see the amount of blood on her clothing and on the floor. He had sounded the alarm and she had been driven to Yersin Hospital which is not far from the police station. He had never forgotten that terrifying moment. My aunt was allowed to leave in the afternoon after having visited the cell where her daughter had had a brush with death.

For three days I got not even a grain of rice to eat and had only a mouthful of water on the first day since, after the interrogation sessions, we were returned to the cells after the mealtime was finished. In the cells the jailors only knew us by number, we were no longer individuals, so who cared whether we were hungry or thirsty.

The old woman in my cell had been released after three days. She was an itinerant peddler of chicken pho noodle soup. In a shakedown she had been found with a bank note from the liberated zone with the image of President Ho Chi Minh. She told me that a soldier in Bao Dai's army had used it to pay for a bowl of noodles. Thus, he had avoided paying and she had been served three days in prison.

On the third day Toan shared my cell. We knew that our confessions had been accepted and all that remained was to close the file. We slept peacefully.

On the fourth day we were thrown into a large cell with about ten convicts. This cell was named "The Violin" and was full of both political and civil prisoners. The cell was about four meters by five. Outside a square opening used by the jailors to observe us there was a window that overlooked the passage that led to the place where the most severe tortures were inflicted on the "hard cases" or in Vietnamese *tau ngam* (submarine).

I was told that the victim was placed in a barrel of cold water through which an electric charge was passed so that he wriggled in the water like a fish. What I found most heart-breaking about these days in The Violin was the cesspit. For several hundred prisoners there were only six latrines. The excrement always overflowed and spread all over the surrounding area which swarmed with the larvae of flies. At one point I caught amoebic

dysentery. It was frightful to have to bang on the door several times a day and ask the jailer to let me go to the latrines. I had to spend at least half an hour in the latrines and when I returned the others complained about the noisome odour of my garments.

Months later I still had nightmares about these nauseating latrines. We were never left in peace except for Sundays. Our cell was next to the wall that separated the prison from the police station. There was an interrogation cell on the other side of this wall. During working hours, we heard the shouting of the executioners mingled with the screams of the victims.

On the outside my mother had made several attempts to free me on account of my status as a minor. But Christmas passed and still no sign of release. So, I started to ask for prison work. Since my mother brought me food every three days without seeing me, I was able, thanks to the person who delivered the food, to ask her also for more food, a physics textbook by Georges Eve and some wool with which to knit a sweater. On New Year's Day I had finished embroidering an image of the Statue of Liberty in New York (with flaming torch in one hand and shattered chain in the other) on the corner of my handkerchief with a few coloured threads given me by a young lady who had spent a night in our cell prior to being released. Since we were not allowed pencils, I had to design the image from my memory. I would have liked to keep the handkerchief as a memento of my time in jail, but unfortunately an opium dealer stole it from the me on the eve of his release. I was forced to make another one, but this time without the Statue of Liberty. Since the evenings were very long and the light dim, Toan and I entertained ourselves by chanting a repertoire of songs and poems by revolutionary writers. Our fellow prisoners joined in.

On one occasion we were visited by a group of police inspectors who wanted to know whether we had any complaints. Without having the time to think the matter over, I seized the opportunity to say two things:

1. I demanded newspapers to read since we were political prisoners.

2. To not allow prostitutes to spend the night in our cell. We were too often awoken at night by the grinding of the locks, the knocks on the door and the insults of these women. I knew that they were required to be kept separate until they could be taken to the dispensary where they could be treated for venereal disease, but the jailers were reluctant to take them all the way to the empty cells at the far end of the courtyard on cold winter nights.

No doubt the jailers also made a report to the inspectors, noting that in the evening the two schoolgirls turned the prison into a sort of "youth club", since when two young peddlers close to us in age joined us, we had fun and laughed out loud. One day a strict jailer came and shouted in at our window: "Could you shut up! It's prison here, not a night club."

Three days later Toan's mother and mine were summoned to the police station to sign a guarantee of our good behaviour until such time as the military tribunal could be called to hear our case. We were released two weeks before the Tet (Lunar New Year) holiday. Perhaps the inspectors had decided that it was counterproductive to hold us in prison. They might do better to release us and to try to trap us engaged in secret communications. But on the very day that I returned home, my mother received a notification from the Governor of North Vietnam that my release had been denied. I was required the appear at my trial in front of the tribunal.

Thus, my period of liberty was brief and even then, I was strictly monitored by my mother. I was expelled by the Nguyen Trai Lycée a few days after my return to school. The principal was Dao Van Trinh, an elderly history teacher whose best pupil I had been in 1948-9 before matriculating to Trung Vuong College. I remember that he once gave us the essay title: "The influence of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism in Vietnam." I wrote about the influence Confucianism and Buddhism had on me personally. We practiced these traditions at home, but I knew nothing of Taoism. My essay had obtained the highest mark and the teacher had quoted from my essay in class.

On the day of my return to the lycée, the principal had a meeting with me in his office. He remembered his former pupil. He encouraged me to prepare for the exams as an independent candidate and left me my lycée ID card for the oral test in case I should be successful in passing the written part of the exam. I saw on his desk a history of Vietnam in the years 1940-52 by Philippe Devillers and from this I knew that he was a sympathizer of the Resistance and thus I was quite calm. It was clear that his action would help me avoid any problems with the oral test as was the case with those suspected of Viet Minh activities at the Albert Sarrault French Lycée.

I had four months to prepare for the exams at home. I was obliged to borrow books of notes taken by friends in the same year at the lycée and I bought books in French covering the 2nd part of the curriculum for experimental sciences to review on my own. I felt confident having works by famous teachers in France, beautifully printed with fine illustrations. In the end I passed the exams with distinction while a third of my year group were required to take them again the following year.

My mother was very happy about my achievement and believed that with my result she could send me to France for university. My brother, who was already doing the Advanced Maths program at the Louis le Grand Lycée in Paris, sent me all the necessary documents for entering the faculty of science at Paris University. However, the police department categorically refused me an exit visa on account of my being under surveillance. In France, the movement in support of Ho Chi Minh was growing in strength and it was important not to "release the tiger back into the forest."

I thought to myself that, in this case, I should set up contacts with a view to moving to the liberated zone. I was tormented by the idea of spending my time in Hanoi unable to do anything for the Resistance. As a result of the intense bombing of the free areas, a flood of peasant refugees had entered the city, but without anything to do, which made the gap between rich and poor extremely blatant. There were rows of beggars in front of the pagodas. At the same time night-clubs, bordellos, dance-clubs, restaurants and hotels for the rich were expanding rapidly. It was heart-breaking.

While waiting for the opportunity to renew my contacts with the underground movement, I joined the faculty of pharmacy like my elder sister who had wanted to follow in my father's footsteps.

He had won a first-class degree in pharmacy in Paris in 1933 and had then gone into business as a pharmacist in Hanoi with a partner from the same class. In truth we were more interested in research than in the business. During the first year we were required to do a one-year internship in a pharmacy. I joined the Chuong Van Vinh pharmacy, which was situated between Hang Bai Rd and Hang Khay Rd, just next to Hoan Kiem Lake. There were many clients and the interns augmented the workforce. The man who made up the medicines had worked for twenty-five years in the laboratory of Chassagne, the first French pharmacy in Hanoi in the 1920s. I knew who he was, since my father had also done an internship in the same place.

Most of our time was spent in the sale of medicines. The storeroom was located at the back of the courtyard and the pharmacist required us to run back and forth very fast to collect medicines that had run out in the display cases. After a month I became unwell and started to lose weight. As I recuperated, I wondered whether I might not do better to become a teacher of literature or of geography and history. From childhood I had enjoyed these subjects as well as modern languages. In our extended family everyone had done either medicine or mathematics or experimental science. We knew nothing of the social sciences. In our time there was no general tendency in any particular professional direction.

Because of the police ban on my departure my mother was permanently ill at ease. Upon my return from prison, I had told my mother that the final victory would go to Ho Chi Minh, since while in prison I had observed that

all classes of society were united in support of the Resistance. Among the prisoners I had met young workers, students, even a Buddhist monk and a soothsayer etc.

My mother feared prison above all else. She had a cousin who had been an orphan and had been raised by her father. He had joined the technical school in Haiphong and upon graduation had worked as a technical draftsman at the motorcar maintenance workshop AVIAT first in Hanoi, then in Haiphong. He was gifted in drawing, French, painting and wrote poems. Both my grandmother and my maternal uncle knew very well that he was involved in a clandestine patriotic association, because he from time to time hid a suitcase full of political tracts and even a pistol behind the ancestor altar at my grandmother's house and he collected funds for the cause.

He was arrested with other comrades in 1931 on the eve of International Labour Day on May 1st in Haiphong. During the search of his house the police found many political tracts and a printing machine. The reprisal was shocking. He was condemned by the Supreme Court along with his Communist Party comrades to hard labour at the penitentiary at Son La at the end of 1931. My mother said that he had been tall and fit, but after months of detention he contracted malaria and dysentery and had lost his physical strength. He died in 1933 at the age of 27.

The terror of prison and the punishments inflicted upon her favourite cousin caused my mother to redouble her efforts to secure my permission to leave for France. She made a submission to the High Commission to Indochina in Saigon demonstrating that I had always been an excellent pupil and that my conduct was exemplary. I had been awarded a distinction in the final year and had the honour of representing my college at the annual award of prizes at the Opera House in Hanoi. Furthermore, I had passed the baccalaureate at 18 with distinction as an independent candidate, when many others had failed. Given my delicate health how could I stand prison? It would be better to let me pursue my studies in France. The required papers for entering the Sorbonne were all prepared… Through our good fortune, the French administrator in Saigon responsible for education had graduated from the Albert Sarrault Lycée in the same year as my father. He resolved the matter. In October 1953 I obtained the exit visa for France on the orders of Saigon and thus the police service of North Vietnam was obliged to let me go.

In those days airplanes were a luxury. My mother was still afraid that we would receive further harassment that might prevent my departure. She had had to sell a house that I was due to inherit from my uncle who had died so

young in order to buy the airplane ticket and everything else necessary for my rushed departure. She took the first available ticket and as a result I found myself on a flight reserved for French officers.

On arrival at Gia Lam airport, I was scared stiff at the sight of so many uniformed men in the waiting hall. Those leaving were happy. The others were gloomy and worried. To leave and return home was to be spared combat, to escape death; to stay was to risk death. As for me, I was completely thrown by this enforced journey. I felt as though I were being cast into a cage with steel bars, surrounded by armed men.

Old memories flooded back. I had hated the foreign soldiers since childhood. I had been only six years old when the Japanese had invaded Hanoi. Because of their presence, we had suffered bombing by American planes in 1943-45. After the surrender of the Japanese came the August Revolution and the solemn Proclamation of Independence by president Ho Chi Minh on the 2nd of September 1945 at Ba Dinh Square in Hanoi. At the suggestion of Uncle Ho, the young people of Hanoi organized a huge and magnificent mid-autumn festival for the children.

The whole population were cheering. The young people led the children along the roads decorated with lanterns made of coloured cellophane and performed the Lion Dance in front of the Bac Bo Phu palace where Uncle Ho joined in to share the happiness with the children – future citizens of a free Vietnam. Then the children flocked to the shores of Lake Hoan Kiem (Lake of the Restored Sword) to play at fighting, armed with grenades made of pomelo skin at their belts, pretending to rebuff the invaders who were coming ashore to retake the newly liberated country. After their victory, all around the lake the young ladies of the Old Quarter regaled us with traditional cakes and prepared fruits. Before this the celebration of mid-autumn festival had been only a family matter; but now the ladies of the Old Quarter showed off their decorative talents with papayas turned into colourful flowers and sweet dogs made of pomelo. How impressive was their ability when preparing cakes and pancakes? The festival took place below the verandas and in the courtyards by the light of the full moon. Everyone was invited to admire the dresses of the young ladies and, by tradition, this was also the day to choose a husband or a wife.

With the revolution much changed in our way of life. Never before had we the children and the young people witnessed such a magnificent spectacle. This memory remained with us indelible in the long years of warfare. The joy had been ephemeral. A few days later 200,000 Chinese soldiers arrived to disarm the Japanese. They were very numerous and to tell the truth they were hungry, diseased and without discipline. They had simply come to see what they could find to eat. At the same time, they spread diseases such as typhus (transmitted by fleas) and yellow fever (spread by mosquitoes). When we heard of the arrival of Chinese troops gathering in front of the

university in the evening, we were curious to have a look; but oh! Their trumpet blowing was depressing, and their uniforms were ragged. Nonetheless, they were our allies come to disarm the much more disciplined Japanese.

In the rear followed people in rags with shoulder poles bearing baskets with pots and pans. They were nothing more than extra mouths to feed after the catastrophic famine of the past summer. The Chinese soldiers took over schools and lycées to make their bivouacs. They took down the windows to burn the wood. As for us we studied either in communal houses or in the temples around Hanoi.

After the treaties of 6th March 1946, it was time for the relief of the Chinese troops by a French army well-equipped with armoured cars provided by the Americans. At their head was General Philippe Leclerc de Hautecloque, who was the hero of the Liberation of Paris in June 1944 and Commander in Chief, Indochina from 1945. General Leclerc had a feeling for the facts and was broad-minded, so sought peace and negotiations with the government of Ho Chi Minh. He sought to avoided getting bogged down in a guerrilla war while Admiral Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu, High Commissioner and Commander in Chief of all armed forces in the Far East was for the reconquest of Indochina. General Leclerc was dispatched to North Africa on another mission and there was to be no peace. After the battles of Lang Son and then Hai Phong, we had to evacuate Hanoi to await the outcome of negotiations. However, war broke out in Hanoi on the evening of 19th December 1946. After a few days of preparation my mother sent us to stay with cousins of my father, who lived in Thanh Hoa, about 160 km from Hanoi. First, we travelled by sampan to Ninh Binh and then by night train to Thanh Hoa. At this time, there was fierce fighting in both Hanoi and Nam Dinh. Our side began to practice scorched-earth tactics in the main centres of the country and the destruction of bridges and roads in order to prevent the free circulation of the enemy's armoured cars and tanks and to prepare for a long resistance.

After Tet on 17th February 1947, President Ho Chi Minh came to Thanh Hoa, first to meet with the cadres in the area around the headquarters at Rung Thong and then to address the people at the propaganda house. Since leaving Hanoi I have become accustomed to making notes of events and changes in my diary. This was also a form of leisure activity since we were unemployed since classes were out. Thus, I wrote down what Ho Chi Minh had to say. He appealed for solidarity between the local population and those evacuated from the north. All production output needed to be doubled and preparations made for a long resistance.

From the following day, the French planes started bombing Rung Thong and the whole town was overcome with alarm at the rumbling of the airplane engines just above our heads. This sped up the destruction of houses in the

town and all families had to pull down their own houses and flee to the countryside. Thus, we fled to the remote areas under the lee of Nua Mountain, right up to the native village of Madam Trieu who, along with her brother, had led the insurrection against the Chinese in the 3rd Century. My elder sister and I both worked in a cigar factory to make enough money to get by.

My mother did not want us to abandon our studies and so planned to return to Hanoi. She took the risk of going back alone, then after two months, at the end of December, she returned to Thanh Hoa to collect us. She had found her mother and my uncles and aunts all safe and sound, while our home had been pillaged by the French legionaries right at the beginning of the war. They had taken everything of value such as porcelain vases and had burnt the library with all the books and family photograph albums. They had wanted to set fire to the whole house, but the French neighbours persuaded them not to for fear that the ensuing fire might spread to their own houses.

We learned the sad news that my father's friend Dr. Nguyen Van Luyen had been shot alongside his son in his own home by the legionaries. Dr. Luyen had been highly active in the same social circles as my father. He had written a useful book on maternity for mothers.

The father-in-law of my cousin Tan, Dr. Au, had also been killed with his medical student son when they were caught helping out with the wounded in a Red Cross tent at Son Tay. Originally, I had not wanted to return to Hanoi, a city under occupation by the French. I reminded my mother that we had taken a solemn oath on Independence Day of 2nd September 1945 not to collaborate with the French if they undertook the reconquest of our country. My mother had to persuade me, saying: "You are too young, you are no use to the Resistance. At your age one should study. After the victory, the country will need well-trained people to engage in reconstruction."

On the way home we passed the towns of Thanh Hoa and Ninh Binh. Everything had been destroyed except for the church. I remembered how when we had passed through Thanh Hoa a year before, the town had been busy and prosperous with its big marketplace where one could buy products from the plains and the mountains as well as all kinds of seafood. I had never seen cuttlefish and shrimps so large and fresh. Even the buffaloes and the cattle were extra large! There were also all kinds of objects fashioned from bamboo and rattan, well woven by hand and of excellent quality. My mother used a very pretty container made of bamboo and rattan as her sewing basket for more than ten years. And the lovely Ham Rong (Dragon's Jaws) bridge, which had transformed the scenery of two mountains into a picturesque view had disappeared for ever. By using the tactics of scorched earth, the people were making a huge sacrifice to regain independence and liberty.

We had stopped off for one night at the home of a cousin of my father's in the outskirts of Hanoi. Like many villages on the banks of the Red River there was a lot of greenery, but we saw it just after a clearing-up operation by soldiers coming from various French colonies; it was a catastrophe. All the paddy fields after the harvest and all the bamboo huts with latan leaf roofs had been burnt. The trees appeared yellow and drooping. Young girls, despite covering their faces with mud, had been raped by African soldiers who, on account of their size, seemed like giants to us.

It was late in December. We were frozen to the bone. We had to spend the night in the open air, with a mat over our heads. We learned that the preferred method of the French leaders was to clean out the Viet Minh by sowing terror among the population. And yet, contrary to all appearances, the majority of the people were on the side of the Viet Minh.

The following morning, as we left the village, I was saddened to see the fields of paddy half burnt and half yellow the length of the road from the village. Two years later I learned that Ho, the first-born of my father's cousin, had been shot dead at the age of twenty by the French on suspicion of being a guerrilla. He had just married. I remember him as a handsome fellow, full of life. What destiny. In peacetime he would have had a peaceful life surrounded by wife and children. And his parents might have had a grandchild.

Back in Hanoi it took us several months to regain possession of our part of the house in the French quarter. The couple named Litov, who were living in our house, granted us the use of three rooms on the first floor of the annex at the back of the courtyard. Previously these rooms had been reserved for the pretty dancing girls. Eight years earlier my mother had had the lower part of this annex, which had become run down, destroyed, and replaced it with a bungalow with three rooms in addition to those reserved for my cousins of various status who thus escaped from the supervision of my grandmother. The couple who had taken possession of our villa made good money out of the bar-dancing.

I remember that during the colonial period the French troops had remained in their barracks in the Citadel, while the officers took to the streets either in impeccable uniforms or elegant suits. The skilful French administration was able to rule the local population with a light touch. But this time of reconquest was different. Everywhere we treated the soldiers just like the Japanese. Also, they were now free to walk with prostitutes in the street. The Litovs had employed a former legionary to manage the dance hall. He was of German extraction and had a haughty and stern appearance. One day I saw him torture a mouse. He attached electric wires to its paws to give it electric shocks and he set it alight so that it ran around like a moving torch while its

executioner roared with laughter. My mother was able, after making every effort and by dint of paying an indemnity, to regain possession of our house with about twenty books formerly in my father's library.

The train of my thoughts was broken by the stream of officers who came in great numbers up the aisle of the airplane cabin. I was overcome at the sight of men in khaki uniforms, with caps or kepis on their heads, who took their places, one after another, in the airplane. The plane had only four seats in each row with an aisle down the middle. I stuck my face to the porthole to try to distract myself from what was happening and not to miss my first experience of an airplane taking off.

All of a sudden, I heard a soft voice right next to my seat say: "Is this seat occupied?" I turned my head and saw a young French man, elegant with chestnut locks and spectacles in black frames, a black striped velvet jacket and grey trousers.

I allowed with a grunt that indeed it was not. I was astonished to hear myself talking French. I had been warned: I would be the only Vietnamese on the flight. I was absolutely separated from my homeland. Even the connection to my mother tongue was broken. By good fortune, my neighbour was a civilian, a fact that calmed me.

The young man placed his hand-luggage in the locker above and then, having carefully adjusted his safety belt, turned to me, and said in Vietnamese: "Co..sang…Phap…hoc?" or "Are you going to study in France?"

I nodded my head, controlling an involuntary desire to laugh prompted by the fluent Vietnamese spoken by the young man.

"Yes, I am registered to join the faculty of science at the Sorbonne. What about you?" I had replied in French, unsure how competent he was in Vietnamese.

"I am an electrical engineer at the electric power station in Yen Phu. I return to France every year to take my holidays."

I had an inspiration: he was in the urban lighting business, which was good. My brother wanted to be an engineer. But, I could not hold in a sigh: soon this man would be back with his family. And I? A departure without return. He may have told me his name, but I have forgotten it.

The rumbling of the engines was powerful and the airplane shook a lot. I stuck my nose to the porthole. Goodbye Hanoi. In an instant I saw Lake Hoan Kiem lying beautiful as an emerald with its Ngoc Son Temple and Turtle Pagoda. I strained to see the roof of our house among the spreading trees, but could only spot the pointed roof of the Louis Finot Museum, the roofs of Vietnam University and the large grey roof of tiles that belonged to the Opera House. Oh my God! For us, this opera house was not a place for

peaceful artistic performances. Since childhood, my impression of the place had been dominated by the wailing of the eight sirens that were used to sound the alert. At the sound; quick, quick into the trenches. Especially at night, woken with a start, I was so disconcerted that I bumped into walls instead of leaving the room. I knew that our house was amid that group of trees and that my mother was there. At that moment, what could she be thinking?

“I’m on my way, Mum” I whispered, heartbroken.

Over there I see the Red River which crawls across the landscape like a great serpent, amid the harvest-time rice paddies. This precious river, with its dike only a short distance from our home, had been a place of fun for us, youngsters on the hunt for a little fresh air on evenings of sweltering heat.

The airplane followed National Highway 5 to Haiphong. In the mornings, this road was a spectacle both tumultuous and hectic. Here were cars, bicycles, buffalo carts, tiny when viewed from high above - tiny dots moving in slow motion and the train lazy on its rails.

All of this reminded me of children’s toys available for sale at the Reunis Godard shop on Trang Tien St in the French quarter near Hoan Kiem Lake. I remembered how, when we were children, our older cousins took us to this shop to admire the toys on view in the display cases.

Like all children I had been bewitched by all the lights and all the toys. But we had to be content with admiring them and dreaming, without buying. Dreams of plush bears, dolls, model trains and cars etc….From my father’s time all we had left was one doll with blinking eyes and my brother’s little red bicycle. Sometimes I heard my Uncle Tan say: “If only Uncle Hai were alive, we would surely all have toys from this shop.” Yes indeed, since in that time my father had also had a Renault car. In my mind’s eye I saw once again the photograph of my sister and brother with my father in his car at the Botanical Gardens.

My father, my brother Hac Vu and my elder sister Huong Thu at the Botanical Gardens. Hanoi 1935

My father, my brother Hac Vu and my elder sister Huong Thu at the Botanical Gardens. Hanoi 1935 My cousins all had happy memories of that modern car, while I had no experience of those golden years.

We were obliged to take the airplane for the short 100 km trip from Gia Lam airport to Cat Bi airport. I consoled myself with the view of the delta landscape that stretched out before my eyes on this cloudless late autumn day. The tiny straw huts lay hidden among the bamboo groves of the lush villages. The Red River and other streams snaked around the paddy fields covered in golden ears of rice, flowing nonchalantly, carrying their freight of pink sediment. What a peaceful scene, but that peace was only deceptive.

Highway 5 was not secure. Military convoys risked being ambushed or encountering mines laid by the Viet Minh. Most likely this flight had been reserved for the military. My neighbour and I were the only civilians. Even here in the airplane it was impossible to forget the war. In reality the guerrilla war was intense in the Red River Delta.

My mother was in the habit of buying rice from a lady who brought it 18 km along Highway 5 from Ban Yen Nhan. She was a chubby person, with vivid eyes. She told us stories of the exploits of the guerrillas along the road. Military trains had been destroyed by Viet Minh mines. After such episodes, the reprisals of the French troops in the surrounding villages were appalling; they gunned down suspects, burned many houses, pillaged rice, livestock, and poultry. I wondered whether this lady might be a courier between the occupied and liberated zones. While in prison I had met such a courier who had sold vegetables in the market in Hanoi, while also escorting

African and Legionary deserters to the liberated zone. When I met her, she had been arrested for the second time. She was tortured with electric shocks and beaten up to the point that she could never have children.

The airplane landed gently at Cat Bi. We changed planes for the much longer international flight. On the runway I was shocked to see so many bombers lined up, ready to go. Under the influence of heavy military support from the Americans, General Henri Navarre, who had relieved General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, had conceived the mad idea of taking on the regular forces of the Viet Minh, bringing them to a decisive battle, defeating them and thus ending the war with honour. Just like de Lattre before him, Navarre failed to take into account the fighting spirit of the Viet Minh soldiers or the fact that the whole population was mobilized in support of this just cause, to rid our ancestral soil of the foreign invader.

Philippe Devillers is an historian who wrote "History of Vietnam from 1940-52", a good analysis of the situation. He anticipated the failure of Bao Dai. This war had lasted seven years. Countless lives had been lost on both sides. General Leclerc had been right to say in 1946 that negotiations with the government of Ho Chi Minh were the best solution. No victory can be won by force alone. After seven years of war, so much blood had been shed. Yet even this war reached its final stage.

In the arrival hall I was astonished to find my aunt Vuong and my cousin Tan. My aunt was visiting her eldest son in Haiphong. He worked in the customs office in Haiphong and in 1951-2 we had spent a few holidays together. Since he had been a scout, he enjoyed arranging expeditions. On one occasion he took Hong Phan and me to see the Sau Kho warehouse in Hai Phong port. I will never forget seeing all the napalm bombs with USA markings lined up on the docks. They would be dropped on the Resistance areas.

On another occasion we cycled to Do Son beach, about 23 km from Haiphong and saw a line of Viet Minh prisoners of war carrying great blocks of stone up the hills on their shoulders for the construction of new blockhouses, under the brutal summer sun. My memories of the war are atrocious. According to the Viet Minh radio "The French use the war to feed the war" and we could see clearly for ourselves how Bao Dai had become an instrument of civil war by recruiting the young men in universities and schools to join his officer corps.

My aunt was delighted to know that I had passed the second stage of the baccalaureate and that I was able to go to France to continue my studies. She remembered how puny I had been in primary school and how, since I was often unwell, she had advised my mother not to force me to go on to graduation. However, my mother had her own ideas. She was convinced that I must study hard and learn a profession before marrying so as not to be dependent upon my husband's family as my aunt was. Now my aunt smiled

at me and said: “I am taken aback because in the flash of an eye you have managed to pass both stages of the baccalaureate.” She had rewarded me for my achievement with a silk fan exquisitely embroidered with apricot blossoms. In Hanoi, my aunt Hao had also rewarded me with a copy of *Tale of Kieu* by Nguyen Du. She had advised me to read it whenever I should feel homesick and to amuse myself by writing riddles.

A few more soldiers boarded the second aircraft, but I remained the sole woman on board, with the exception of the air hostesses. Our seat allocation was the same, even for my neighbour.

The airplane took off at 9am. It was the first lovely day of autumn and the sky was clear. As we rose, I could see clearly the estuaries specked with mauve sails, the waters rosy with sediment or crashing against limestone cliffs. Not far from Haiphong the islets rose green from the water and over there lay the deep blue sea.

Then the airplane banked and headed west. After we had crossed the plain, we saw areas scattered with villages surrounded by seas of bamboo. Above the hills, little clouds gathered like flocks of sheep. Finally, the airplane flew over the mountains. The waters of the Song Da River were green, but of a different hue from the rivers of the plain. From time to time a cloud of spray from a waterfall marked the green with a white stripe.

From that morning, I had seen so many different landscapes from the airplane. Despite the pleasure afforded by this aerial discovery of my native land, I nonetheless felt profoundly saddened my departure, without any return date, which was tearing me from my family and my homeland. Would these landscapes remain the same after the war with all those huge bombers and napalm bombs? From earliest childhood I had always quaked at the sound of the air-raid sirens. I felt worn down by the constant noise of the engines which put my nerves on edge. Suddenly I had goosebumps as I realized that, to those below, we must be making the same noise as a bomber. Had we frightened the population? Had we set off the cries of the old people calling the children to the air-raid shelters?

For my generation, the airplane could not be seen primarily as a convenient means of transportation. It was first and foremost an instrument of war and an agent of death. Violent, terrifying, implacable, it was impossible to escape. It was both pitiless and precise. Our cousins from Thanh Hoa had fled the bombing and come to live with us in Hanoi. My cousin had a daughter aged four, but with the body of a two-year old. Perhaps it had been the incessant air raids day and night during the pregnancy of her mother that had caused the birth of this little person who refused to grow. The worst catastrophe was that caused by the napalm bombs dropped on villages suspected of harbouring military forces. I remembered that in prison I had met a military nurse from “behind enemy lines” in Thai Binh who had been captured in a trench with two wounded soldiers. She described to me the

appalling burns caused by napalm, a kind of solid petroleum. She had felt a heart-breaking pain every time she lifted the dressing on the soldiers' wounds. Most of the young soldiers died after a few days as a result of the awful agony they suffered without any antiseptic. The rare survivals had their forms distorted by such deep scars that they could not be recognized. I considered that after the Indochina war the casualties caused by American napalm could not be fewer than those caused by the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan.

I was considering these matters when my neighbour stretched over me to look out of the window and murmured into my ear: "We are now flying over the border between Vietnam and Laos. There is still time to jump out with a parachute, if you so desire."

I turned my head and gazed at the man in the adjacent seat: his face of light skin, brown eyes with curled eyelashes sparkling with malice behind his glasses.

This joke was in bad taste and yet this college humour was exactly what I felt at the time. Had my travel companion followed the direction of my thoughts? How long had he been spying on me? Did he guess that while my eyes were glued to the porthole, looking out at the sky in silence, I was cut off from the world and as hermetic as a sealed oyster, full of disdain for what surrounded me? Truly, I was not prepared for this voyage to the West.

I replied: "I do not want to leave my country, but the die is cast now." I sighed deeply. I had nothing to explain. I stuck my nose into the window again. Below me the ranges of mountains and the deep green of the mysterious forests.

Finally, my separation with my native land was a reality.

Two: Far from my homeland

I was overcome with sadness. I wished to talk to no one. I knew that my neighbour would have like to have consoled me. I was alone and so was he. According to our traditional education, a young woman should not engage in friendly conversation with a young man. Even at the lycée, where we were only five girls in the final class, we huddled together on the same bench, never looked behind us and stuck to ourselves during the breaks. The sole boy with whom I spoke was the class representative. Here the situation was more serious: a foreigner. Nonetheless I considered him to be serious and courteous; and I was curious. I wanted to speak French and ask him about the trip.

Since the Japanese coup d'état in March 1945, I had had no opportunity to speak French. Since all the schools had been closed, I had had ample time to explore all the books in my father's library. I was an avid reader: La

Fontaine, Alphonse Daudet, Moliere, Anatole France, Victor Hugo, Honoré de Balzac, even the maxims of La Rochefoucauld. I learned all the proverbs in the illustrated Little Larousse dictionary. In those days famine hung over the North. We could never satisfy our hunger. Rice was rationed and the quality was very mediocre. No matter. I filled myself with spiritual nourishment. It is sad that my father's library had been destroyed when the soldiers had occupied our house in late December 1946.

I remember that President Ho Chi Minh had visited the young ladies of Trung Vuong College in early October 1946. At that time French-Vietnamese relations were strained. He came in during the French class and insisted that, whatever the misunderstandings, we still had a high regard for French culture and language.

At the end of the 1950-1951 school year in second form. Dam Thu is standing with a schoolbag, fourth from the right.

At the end of the 1950-1951 school year in second form. Dam Thu is standing with a schoolbag, fourth from the right.

Principal Nguyen Thi Yen, seated in the middle, with the teachers of Trung Vuong College in 1949.

Principal Nguyen Thi Yen, seated in the middle, with the teachers of Trung Vuong College in 1949.

My friends at the centenary of Dong Khanh-Trung Vuong School (1917-2017).

My friends at the centenary of Dong Khanh-Trung Vuong School (1917-2017).

I returned to my oyster-like hermetic state. I heard the air hostess announce: “Beneath us lies Mandalay, the former capital of Burma.” I stretched my neck better to see what lay below. How magnificent! The former Buddhist capital and its superb architecture. A deep moat surrounded the walls of the imperial palace. The tall golden pinnacles of the

Buddhist temples stretched up to towards the sky and gleamed in the sun. I inwardly thanked the air hostess for taking care not only of our physical well-being, but also of our cultural instruction.

When we landed in Calcutta, I was astonished to see the large number of factories with columns of smoke belching from their tall chimneys. This town is the capital of Bengal, on the river Ganges which flows into the Bay of Bengal. It is also the birthplace of Rabindranath Tagore who had, in 1913, been the first Asian writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. By following the conversations between my uncle and his Indian neighbours in Silk St, I had learnt that under the British Empire the Indians had obtained both heavy and light industries. They had managed to gain independence without violence by staying in the Commonwealth.

But we only got to see the restaurant at the airport. My watch was set at 1400 hrs. while the clock at the airport read 1200 hrs. My first test on leaving my country was the use of knife and fork as opposed to chopsticks. Inexpert, I could only stab at the pieces of meat in my curry with my fork. I pushed down as hard as I could with the knife, but could not separate the meat from the bones. I regretted not having stayed closer to my neighbour on the airplane. He behaved with discretion and courtesy in letting me make my way to a seat apart from the other passengers. In addition to my trouble with the meal, an Indian waiter came and asked me in a fairly rude manner: “Do you have dollars?”

I made as if I could not understand, but he simply raised his voice and insisted: “Do you have dollars…dollars?” So, I responded hastily: “No, no dollars” and shook my head from left to right again and again to try to drive him away. In fact, I had only been able to exchange a few French bank notes and pounds sterling for the refuelling stops before my departure. I had no idea even what a dollar looked like. Despite my hunger the lunch offered nothing to my taste. I could not abide mutton. At home, my mother had always served curry sauce with chicken or pork. There were no sheep in our country. Here in India, perhaps because of religious taboos, mutton in a very hot curry is preferred. Since I could not manage to separate the meat from the bones with my knife, I had to content myself with a few bits of potato and a banana. That was all for the very first meal away from my country.

We continued the flight in the direction of New Delhi. All afternoon we flew over the delta of the Ganges which rises in the mountains of the Himalaya. It reminded me of the Red River which rises in the mountains of Yunnan in China. It was the dry season, and the channel of the river was flanked by wide expanses of silt. I remembered the spring of 1949-50 when I and a group of friends had climbed the sand dunes by the Red River. We climbed up and took photographs. Our golden age was passed. Here the harvest was over and all one saw was a mauve soil, rather austere in appearance: nothing green to see.

I thought of my mother. I admired her broad view of life. Since I had started this solo journey in the morning, I had been neither deaf, dumb, or blind and this was due to her. She had encouraged me to learn modern languages, to read in French and English, while also refusing to allow me to read the popular Vietnamese novels of the day. When my sister had started at the university, I was able to borrow her library card and thus expand my knowledge of literature with English, American and German works, all translated into French. At 17 I had been bewitched by "Gone with the Wind" by Margaret Mitchell and many works by Pearl Buck. I had read little Tagore, but liked his engaging style and his good humour as well as his fondness for children. I told myself that I could explore more works by Tagore during my leisure time in France.

We were moving from East to West, so it seemed as if we were endlessly following the setting sun. The sky remained touched with a golden and purple-red glow. It was a splendid sight! When the light finally died on the horizon and the earth turned black, I was overcome with nostalgia. My feelings were well-expressed by the poem "Nostalgic Sunset" by the wife of the under-prefect at Thanh Quan, a well-known poet of the 19th century. I doubted that she had ever been as isolated as I was at that moment, far from my homeland, from my loved ones and cut off from my mother tongue.

All through the journey I was like the little goat belonging to Mr. Seguin in Alphonse Daudet's *Lettres de Mon Moulin.* During the day it had gambolled on the mountain, grazing on the fresh grass, frolicking in total freedom and yet, when evening came, it was afraid of the wolf and wished to return to its byre. I closed my eyes and tried to visualize the evenings at home. Oh God! Just one journey and yet I felt like a little sailboat afloat in a massive ocean, without means of returning to shore.

Suddenly the loudspeaker announced: "We are about to descend into New Delhi." Woken with a start, I stuck my eyes into the porthole. My heart beat violently. "Have I strayed into a fairy-tale kingdom? Lights like coloured stars lit up the palaces and the monuments in the night. I had never seen anything like this. I realized that I was arriving at the Jewel in the Crown of the British Empire, the second great power of Asia. India was an ancient civilization which had had a huge influence on the lands of South-East Asia. After diner I took the opportunity to explore the display cases at the airport which were full of Indian products. Everything was well-lit and well-displayed, but novel to me since all the salespeople were male. This seemed strange to me since in Vietnam this kind of work was the preserve of women. In front of the silk counters young ladies wandering about in floating saris of gold and silver thread made a captivating spectacle. When I entered the jewellery display, I felt as though I were in the cave with Aladdin and his magic lamp as in"Thousand and One Nights." I was seeing for the

very first time unimaginable treasures of diamond, precious stones and jewels made of gold, silver and ivory. All these things displayed variety, poise, and prosperity.

During the night flight from New Delhi to Karachi (in Pakistan) I reviewed my impressions of the journey thus far. Laos, covered with forests, then Burma with its rolling hills of tea plantations, its magnificent monuments and Buddhist temples. Then India, with the display of its hectic and prosperous commerce. What struck me was that our country was primarily a backward agricultural country where academic achievement was valued over commerce. I remembered the raw silk shop run by my maternal grandmother in Silk Street, where all her textiles had been made by hand. Also, in Vietnam retail was the activity of women. But raw silk had lost its popularity with the onslaught of textiles and fabrics from France that followed colonization. In India, the British had constructed all kinds of factories making steel, food products and textiles, but France exported our raw materials back to its own factories for turning into finished products which it then sold to us. Hanoi was a city of consumption. All it could boast were a match factory and workshops for repairing motor cars and rolling stock. Nothing else. One textile factory and one thread factory in Nam Dinh in the whole overpopulated Red River Delta. Haiphong had one cement factory and a few other manufacturers. No industry in the South which was the source of commodities such as rubber, coffee and rice.

Disaster had struck when World War Two began, as our trade routes to France were cut off and we suffered total loss. I remember how we had to do without soap from Marseilles, toothpaste, sewing thread etc. My mother had to buy a tin of condensed milk on the black market every time I got sick. At night-time she repaired our worn-out clothing. However, I remember that she never left us without schoolbooks and even during the bombing of Hanoi she made us go to school.

The French schools had been evacuated to Ha Dong, about 11 km from Hanoi and in the beginning, we were obliged to get there by the early tram, returning late at night. After a few months, my mother managed to rent a small studio for seven of us in La Khe village near the provincial capital of Ha Dong. We shared the courtyard with a workshop making cotton piece goods by hand. In war time, since there was no fabric from France, we had to find a way to make goods from raw materials like cotton, raw silk and we used peanut oil to light our lamps etc. In the village there was neither electricity nor drinking water. The peanut oil gave sparse light and let off a lot of black fumes. The water from the ponds was polluted and so we used alum to purify it in a tank.

Despite the lack of comforts, we lived a life of liberty. My mother only came once a week to resupply us with food items and to bring schoolbooks published by the “association for dissemination of the national language.”

Thus, we set our own schedule. There was no tutor. In the evenings, after finishing our homework, we read aloud from a student brochure in Vietnamese. I remember how we gathered around with our backs to the mattresses on winter nights to listen to people reading stories in turn while outside the wind blew fiercely and slipped in under the eaves.

In these months of early 1944 to March 1945, I was overjoyed to avoid two burdensome tasks: studying the catechism and church history at the Institute of Holy Mary and the chore of accompanying my despotic grandmother on her visits to various pagodas.

When the Japanese invaded Indochina we knew that the days of French colonialism were numbered. In 1941 the streets were full of Japanese trucks, while the French garrison hid out in the Citadel. Under martial law we from time to time heard a Japanese battalion march down our street singing with all its strength, while the sound of the soldiers' voices stuck gloomily with us.

Our people now found ourselves oppressed by the double yoke of Japan and France. France lost all prestige since, while under the protection of the Japanese, they had had to accept all their laws. They forced our farmers to pull up rice and plant jute to supply the "war machine." The harvest of 1944 was a total loss for us since the French and the Japanese had stock-piled rice for their own use.

On the evening of 9th March 1945, we saw military convoys full of Japanese troops with bayonets at the ready moving along the main Ha Dong road from Hoa Binh to Hanoi. From that evening to the next morning, we heard shooting from Hanoi. We left our house and spread out in the rice paddies to gaze in the direction of Hanoi where the sky was bright red from the fires. The following day all schools were closed. No more cars bringing French teachers from Hanoi. The Japanese coup d'etat had succeeded.

Two days later, my senior aunt from Phuc Yen sent a guide to bring us to the village of Cu An in Phuc Yen province, on the other side of the Red River, for fear of the imminent allied landing.

We were six students on three bicycles with the guide sent by my aunt Vinh. From Ha Dong to Cu An we avoided the main roads and crossed the river in a sampan. Cu An village was close to the birthplace of the Trung Sisters who had rebuffed the Han Dynasty invaders in the 1st century A.D. Thus, we were able to join in the festivities to celebrate the memory of these two national heroines with parades, popular games and three days of traditional opera, for which my grandmother joined us. She had been living with my aunt for the past two years. Nine people were piled together in one room at the house of a local grandee. I had to share my bed with my grandmother and a

cousin which meant that I remained rigid like a trunk of wood all night for fear of touching the old lady. I was missing my mother who was looking after the house in Hanoi.

When my grandmother learned that the French had been overthrown by the Japanese and that our country would be independent again, she was delighted. She told us about the sad time when the French had twice occupied Hanoi in 1882. She had been 16. Her family and relatives had been rich paper merchants for a long time. The homes of her parents and relatives were on Hemp St and Cotton St in the old quarter of Hanoi. When the guns of the French navy along the Red River were trained on the Citadel, all the population south of the Citadel were ordered to immediately set light to their straw huts and their brick houses with latan leaf roofs in order to confuse the enemy gunners. In this way all the paper, bamboo and latan leaf roofs and the goods of each family were reduced to cinders, but in a lost cause. The shells had hit the munitions store in the Citadel. All was lost. The governor of Hanoi hanged himself from the east gate of the Citadel.

She remembered how once, after she had been married, on the way home to Kham Thien St from the house of her parents in law in Cotton St where she sold paper and writing brushes, she was pursued as a tease by a French soldier who was on guard by the railway station. In those says she had worn a long black dress down to her ankles, her shoes were curved in front and she had her latan leaf hat in one hand and a large basket in the other. She had been so terrified that she had run for her life, losing her hat and her shoes. I told myself that she probably would have kept all these stories secret, were it not for the news that we were free of French oppression. A month later she died at the age of 78 in her own house.

She did not know that 63 years later history would repeat itself. In the first days of the Resistance in December 1946, the house that she had had built in the French quarter was pillaged and all its contents lost to the incoming French Legion expeditionary force.

After two weeks, when the fear of an allied landing had dissipated, we all returned to Hanoi. Since the schools were still closed, my mother taught us Chinese characters. The Japanese had promoted the idea of “Asia of the Asians” and Chinese characters were now in fashion for the instruction of children. We started off with the simple ones, just as my mother had learned them at the age of 5 or 6, thanks to her elder brother. It was no simple thing to learn to write the characters with a brush on xuan paper. Each character had to be well-formed and each stroke correct. After finishing, I then had to go over the corrections, in red ink, made by my mother, with the black ink we applied with rabbit-hair brushes. The red ink was prepared by rubbing pieces of ferruginous sandstone with a little water on a rough plate. It took me a long time to prepare and yet was quickly absorbed by the xuan paper. I studied the characters for three months, while my elder sister gave up after

a few days. Apart from this “forced labour” which built my perseverance, I had all the time I wanted to explore my father’s library. I was fascinated by what I found there.

The Japanese Fascists turned out to be very tough. The famine had become serious when they forced the farmers of the delta to turn over their last reserves of rice to augment the stock of the Japanese troops. This famine with around two million deaths showed us the ruthlessness of the Fascists. We now knew that neither the French colonialists nor the Japanese Fascists were worthy of our confidence in a crisis.

I have never seen so many corpses in the streets of Hanoi as I did during that summer of 1945. Starving men and women flowed into the streets of Hanoi from the Delta in search of something to eat and fell like straw in front of the doors of the houses. The children, stripped of garments, were like walking skeletons. Every day about noon I saw the lorry that, instead of collecting trash, took away the corpses. They were covered with mats, but one could still see the emaciated legs sticking out one end and the tousled hair at the other. The lorry took them to the cemetery where they were interred in a huge common grave.

In this miserable period, our ration of rice was very strictly observed; in order to show our compassion for our compatriots we kept aside a few handfuls of rice every day, which were collected by scouts who then used it to prepare congee for the starving. We knew well that only self-help among compatriots could achieve anything. Based on the appeal of the Viet Minh United Front (The League for National Independence) all the population were united behind the revolution of August 1945. President Ho Chi Minh had proclaimed the independence of Vietnam at Ba Dinh Square, at which event all present had taken a solemn oath to protect our independence by all means. If only the authorities in France had not suffered from a colonial mindset or the tough ex-administrators had understood how we were bound by these historic events, peace could have been safeguarded.

During World War Two the Asian countries had become aware of their own desire for independence and for autonomy. They no longer wanted to be oppressed by foreign colonialists. In Asia, the British, who had a broad view and a sharper sense of the realities, did not oppose the fight for independence in India and in Burma, which became independent in 1947 and 1948, respectively. These countries were able to rebuild in peace after the world war. Unfortunately, our country was once again ravaged for eight years by a war that became more and more destructive.

Three: The sky and earth in a vortex of wind and dust

The airplane descended towards Karachi, the main port city of Pakistan. The ground staff took us to spend the night in a small hotel. We were served hot tea from Ceylon with slices of lemon. I was refreshed when we ascended to

our rooms on the 1st floor. I shared my room with the air hostess. The mosquito net down, she fell asleep immediately, while I found it impossible to close my eyes. It was my first night away from my country. It was hot and the ceiling was rather low. It seemed that the standards of construction were different in French and English colonies. In Hanoi, the houses built to French construction standards were airier with big windows and high ceilings, while here the fan in the low ceiling rattled and irritated me.

I slipped out of bed and looked out of the window, seeing a flower garden flooded with the soft light of the moon. I sat on a chair on the veranda, seeking a little fresh air. From the restaurant below, Indian music wafted up, reminding me of our own monochord and the lamentations of a bewitching beauty bewailing her fate. Was not this the fate of the young women I had met in jail during the tumult of war?

In the prison where we were held, there was one young woman named Cuc who had been jailed already for six months with her two-year-old boy. Since there was no one else to care for the child, he had simply joined his mother in prison. The father, who was much older than the mother, was also in prison, close by. These two had illegally taken medicines from the occupied zone to the liberated zone. Since this family had no one on the outside to keep them supplied with food, I did what I could to share the food supplied by my mother, because what the prison gave us was mediocre and could not possibly meet the needs of the child.

The mother, who was twenty-six and had lovely dark eyes, told me her troubled story. Before the war, she had worked as a nurse in a factory in Haiphong. She had just got married to a worker from the same factory when the war had broken out. Her husband had joined the army and she had taken a job in a military dispensary in Thai Binh.

One day she heard a rumour that her husband had been killed. She had shed bitter tears, only to have her husband return to visit her for one night. By the light of the moon, she had cried her heart out on his shoulder. He was taken aback, while she thought it a bad omen, since this turned out to indeed be their last encounter. A few months later, he had been killed by gunfire in an ambush in Thai Binh. Since her health had suffered from the endless search and destroy operations by the French, she had to change employment. She became a courier of medicines from Haiphong to the liberated zone. While doing this work, she had met Thi, who had become her second husband. Both were now in the same prison, but could only communicate by sight. A kind-hearted jailer on his watch permitted the boy to visit his father and convey the words of his mother and vice versa. After leaving prison I never learnt what had become of this destitute family or how long they had stayed in jail.

Every night in prison the guard threw a few prostitutes into our cell. They were working without license and after spending one night in jail would be taken to a special dispensary to be treated for venereal diseases. We never slept well as a result of the intermittent grinding of the locks and the slamming of the door when it was closed behind them. Out of laziness the jailers could not be bothered to escort them to the empty cells, so threw them in with us since our cell was closest to the main entrance.

Most of these women were young girls whose lives had been disrupted by search and destroy operations. Their ID card photos showed them as country girls dressed in turbans and short blouses. In the city they became waitresses in the restaurants or carried water from the public water supply to the families that didn't have clean water in their houses. Some had acquired a harsh demeanour, full of bad language, while other were prudish.

One night I was taken aback to see a lovely young women stray into our pitch-streaked cell with no furnishings but a plank that ran the length of the wall. This was not what suited this person, elegantly attired in a green brocade *ao dai* scattered with gilded flowers, white pants and pretty, embroidered slippers. That night she shared her life of torment with me.

She had been raised in a comfortable family that grew oranges in the liberated zone at Bo Ha. At the start of the war, her parents had sent her and her brother away to an evacuated school far from their home. Sadly, a bomb had fallen on the family home, instantly killing her parents and two younger sisters. Everything had disappeared and the orange grove had been destroyed. She had been obliged to bring her brother to Hanoi to seek help from relatives, but these had already moved to the South without leaving an address. Left without succour, she had taken a job as a taxi-dancer in a dance hall. Since she spoke a little French, she had earned popularity with the foreign officers. She had supported her brother in his studies up to the baccalaureate; but he had been enlisted in 1951 and she detained in Hoa Binh to provide distraction for the expeditionary force in this distant and mountainous region. It was an awful life.

In early 1952 the French troops had abandoned Hoa Binh without prior notice, leaving the prostitutes behind in the camp. With the Viet Minh shells raining down she had jumped on a moving lorry that was speeding away while bullets flew around. When the lorry had reached safety, she had fallen to the ground in a faint.

Four: Memories of childhood

The melancholy music continued to sound like a plaint, a prayer. The night was embalmed in the scent of various flowers. I was overcome with a strange sadness – one of those scents was that of the same jasmine that had

filled our garden in the peaceful years before the Japanese occupation of Hanoi in 1941. I allowed myself to be transported back to those early years of my childhood.

From the balcony in the bedroom of my grandmother facing on the path that led to the internal courtyard one could look down on a large garden full of traditional flowers that were by custom placed upon the ancestor altars on the 1st and 15th day of every lunar calendar month. My botanist uncle had selected plants that combined medicinal properties with ornamental value. Once I had matriculated at the faculty of pharmacy in Hanoi. I had visited the experimental garden there and rediscovered many of the plants and trees from our own garden. My elder sister had told me how when she was small our uncle had frequently taken her around the garden, explaining to her the medicinal properties of the leaves and flowers of each plant and inculcating her with a scientific mind. For my cousin Hong Phan and I it was a place where we could go for wonderful walks and stimulate our imaginations. In spring and summer, the garden was replete with flowers and I was as happy as Alice in Wonderland. Birds made their nests there and filled the garden with happy song. Bees and butterflies danced about at their ease. On the ground I discovered several kinds of ants: black ones, brown ones, big ones, little ones, good ones, naughty ones. Since we were short of toys, my cousin and I played at restaurants or grocery stores with the varied leaves and flowers.

Sadly, in 1942, this garden was destroyed to make way for an air raid shelter for some twelve people when the American air-force began to threaten the skies above Hanoi. Farewell to the golden age and the dreams of childhood. When I saw the bunches of roses and other flowered plants, cut and piled into carts to take away, I was disconsolate and wept as if loved ones were leaving for ever. Still, we had a few flower beds planted with jasmine around the air-raid shelter and against the façade of the house. My uncle had carefully chosen several coloured varieties that climbed to different heights upon the trellis against the wall.

After my father's death, at the time of New Year 1937, my uncle Hac Doanh had repaired an old villa that my grandmother had bought from a French officer retiring back to his own country. The villa and the adjacent building covered 180 m2 of land, while the garden that surrounded the right side of the villa covered 600 m2. The garden was full of exotic plants, with Indian Almond and Longan trees for shade as well as Arbutus and Camphor trees, bamboo etc. The colonial style villa had been built at the end of the 19th century in the Don Thuy district, the first bit of land ceded to the French navy after the first attack in 1873. My mother told me that the villa originally had verandas front and back, but only three rooms as the French could not abide the tropical heat and fierce sun. They wanted nothing but shade. The rooms on each side were 18 m2, while that in the centre was 24 m2. My uncle had turned the front veranda into three rooms of 10, 12 and 10

m2 respectively and the one at the rear into two rooms, of which one was the bathroom. Where the French had had three big Indian Almond trees and a palm tree that bore no fruit, he put in roses and other ornamental plants.

My grandmother had one third of the villa to herself, along with the balcony that overlooked the garden. My uncle had the rest with a little garden of his own shaded by the large Longan tree. Here he installed a horizontal bar, parallel bars and a swing that was hung with long ropes from a branch of the Longan tree for the use of the children. The large room in the middle served as both living and dining room, as well as where my sister and brother slept at night. In a corner of the room my mother had a little office. The little room in the middle of the façade, that had a door leading to the front door of the villa, remained closed instead of serving as a hallway. It was here that my mother and I shared a sprung bed "Hong Kong-style" with a rigid metal frame. Another door led to the windowless room in the centre of the house, which was airless when the door was closed.

I remember that this room was very crowded with a large bed on one side, a big wardrobe on the other and several wooden chests, a bit like a warehouse. When sick I was isolated in this stuffy and gloomy room. How my mother coped with this situation, compared with when my father had been alive and master of the house, I cannot imagine. One year after our move to this house, my uncle left to continue his studies in pharmacy in France. His place was taken by my cousin Tan as well as other cousins, children of my father's two elder sisters who had come to pursue their primary and secondary schooling at the lycée. My mother was thus responsible for eight of us. It seemed to me rather unjust that my grandmother had a large bedroom and two other rooms comprising a third of the house all to herself, while we were crammed into the remaining two thirds, including the living and dining rooms.

Our leader was my cousin Tan, eldest son of Aunt Vuong.

Family gathering at my grandfather's on Lunar New Year 1923.
My father Nguyen Hac Hai (1st from the left)

Family gathering at my grandfather's on Lunar New Year 1923. My father Nguyen Hac Hai (1st from the left) In those days he was at Lycée Buoi (named for the district in which it was located). While the French had allocated French names to all the streets, we continued to use the Vietnamese names. In this manner we managed to hang on to a little of our national and regional identity. For example, we called the new Boulevard Rialan which was located on the banks of the Red River in the new French quarter "near the top" of Lo Duc St. or simply Lo Duc, since in ancient times that was

where copper cash had been minted. In my family, the phrase Lo Duc was applied to forging of one's character and personality by means of determined study.

My cousin was an active scout. He gave my brother and my male cousins training in gymnastics on the equipment left by my uncle. Since I was the youngest, I learnt from watching the others. He also taught us French vocabulary using the Little Larousse dictionary and by playing with pictures and maps. I remember that he had one game that used a map of the Pacific Ocean to explain the naval engagements of the American and Japanese destroyers and submarines. After once going to the circus, he was kind enough to teach us some rope tricks, which we became obsessed by. He also taught us how to sing patriotic songs, glorifying the national heroes who had led the resistance to foreign aggressors and events such as the battle of Bach Dang River, where our General Tran Hung Dao had defeated the Mongols in the 13th century.

Tan was fortunate to be far from grandmother's bedroom, while we young ones sometimes suffered from her ire when we played too boisterously among ourselves or with the dog. She had a walking stick covered with copper at each end. When we heard the sound of this stick striking the ground, we disappeared lickety-split. As I was the littlest, I ran the slowest or hid inexpertly in a corner by the wardrobe where she could seize me by the arm and - baf, baf - strike me with several blows on my bottom. Nonetheless I was her favourite and her chosen one to help her thread a needle or to recover a needle or spool of thread that had fallen to the ground, for which service she occasionally rewarded me with a handful of peanuts.

We all appreciated the times when grandmother went away, as then we were at liberty to do what we wanted. I was required to accompany her when she went to see her relatives who still lived in the old quarter. This was a kind of forced labour which my elder sister happily passed to me. From the age of seven it was my job to be her special assistant, helping her get in and out of the rickshaw. During the visits, she would talk for hours with her nieces of the same age about commerce or family lore. While she chatted and chewed betel, I sat in a corner, moving my arms to avoid mosquito bites and listening to their stories in silence. There were no friends of my own age, just as was the case when I went with my mother to visit my maternal grandmother or my aunts at Silk St., who gave me either gingerbread or a steaming bowl of *pho*.

Compared with the French quarter with its stately villas surrounded by gardens, the Old Quarter was always hectic, crowded with people and itinerant vendors. During these visits, my paternal grandmother completely forgot about me. Not a drop of water, nothing at all. She didn't realize that children love to play or to eat sweetmeats.

On the other hand, I had the opportunity to learn a lot about the customs and many stories of my paternal family. I had noticed that my grandmother never visited her sisters in the company of my father. They lived far from Hanoi, so she left this responsibility for needy relatives to my mother. For example, the youngest brother of my grandfather had not completed his education and was obliged to stay at the family home to look after his blind father and paralyzed mother. After the parents were both gone, he married the daughter of a sub-prefect who had received a good education and who fulfilled her family duties at his side. However, he remained idle, solitary, and taciturn. While he whiled away his time with bonsai trees and drank wine at meals, his efficient and active wife took care of everything. She had a shop where she sold all kinds of objects made of coloured paper which were used to make votive offerings to the souls of ancestors on festival days. It was fun to think that all the paper objects that represented taels of gold, cash coins, clothing and so on might satisfy the needs of our ancestors in their afterlife. I wondered what it might be like for the ancestors of the poor who might be caught in a vicious cycle and be just as poor in the next life? My grandmother believed in these things, but not my mother. However, my mother recognized that my great-aunt had been able to raise five children on the earnings of this shop, even with the burden of an alcoholic husband.

Thanks to the many visits made with my grandmother, I knew the age-old customs of the Old Quarter. The big houses of my grandmother's two nephews, one in Hemp St., the other in Sugar St., near to the Central Market, had kept their ancestral style of life. The male heads of family had their hair tied up in a bun and long, curved nails. They always wore traditional national dress. When they went out of the house, they were garbed in a long tunic of silk or cotton, while in the house they wore a high-necked blouse with prominent buttons and broad trousers. They appeared idle, spending their time playing chess with friends or collecting ornamental plants. For New Year's Day each one of them would have prepared a display of narcissus, timed to open on the morning of the day.

The management of the family was the responsibility of the wife, who took care of the household expenses required to feed the whole family, promote the education of the boys up to university and choose spouses for their children. Madam Duong sold paper wholesale and had eleven children to raise, while Madam Xuyen sold various kinds of flour and had eight children to take care of. I wondered whether they had ever known a day of leisure in their lives and yet the adage goes: "A boy is worth ten girls." The man was the master of the house, playing a central role in the structure and symbol

of the patriarchal authority. Mr. Xuyen always had two bamboo canes hung on the wall, one of which was for beating the children, the other for his wife. Only God knows whether he did in fact beat her. That was kept secret.

Five: Family Tragedy

My mother always told us that my grandmother had ultimate power over the family and that my grandfather simply and quietly went along with it, perhaps out of gratitude. According to our family genealogy, my grandfather was the scion of the long line of mandarins. When the French had taken over Tonkin (North Vietnam) my great grandfather had been a civil official responsible for the treasury in Hanoi and then in Son Tay. After a time, he was set to retire, but all the family owned was a small house with a garden near Hanoi. His wife was sickly and paralyzed. My grandfather was the eldest of five children and his siblings were still adolescents or younger. The family fell into desuetude. My grandfather was a graduate and had passed the civil service examination. He was known as the Rabbit Mandarin because at Mid-Autumn Festival he had sold baskets of little rabbits in eggshells nestled in cotton wool and wrapped in coloured paper, all made to his design. For lack of money the family often had to make do with congee cooked with squash to assuage its hunger. Lacking kerosene, my grandfather had used eggshells stuffed with fireflies to enable him to study late at night.

When he married my grandmother, who was the younger daughter of a rich paper merchant, her father settled his daughter with two houses in Cotton St. where she kept a paper shop. She sold paper and writing brushes to students in the final two decades of the 19th century. Thanks to her, my grandfather could concentrate on his studies. After having been awarded a bachelor's degree in arts and letters, he was appointed director of education in the Cho Bo district of the mountainous Hoa Binh province. Due to the rough climate and because she fell prey to malaria, my grandmother lost her first three children who were all prematurely born. My grandmother told us how she had made a pilgrimage to the Goddess of Compassion at the Perfume Pagoda and that her prayer had been granted, for my aunt Vinh was born healthy and lived to a good age.

Then, one and another, she gave birth to my aunt Vuong, my father Hac Hai, my uncle Hac Duong, and my younger uncle Hac Doanh in different places in the Red River delta, while they moved around as my grandfather's career demanded. No doubt he was deeply in love with his wife, so cherished by her parents. For her, who was dynamic and resourceful, it was a real sacrifice to leave the hectic Old Quarter, replete with people and consumer products, to follow her husband to places where life was boring and far less comfortable. This was her personal tragedy. Depressed, she complained constantly of stomach ailments and rheumatism, which surely explains why my grandfather displayed great tolerance in the face of her many demands.

My mother lived for three years in Quang Yen province before my grandfather's death. She was grateful for his kindness, simplicity and indulgence, which were the opposite characteristics of my grandmother, who was very demanding. He had hoped to retire and live a quiet, provincial life in School St. in the provincial capital of Quang Yen. That place had a benign climate among pine-covered hills to the west of the town. His gifts were in pedagogy and education. However, when the traditional education system using Chinese characters was abolished and the colonial administration had introduced new methods, he had felt out of place.

He himself had practiced traditional medicine using pharmacological plants, so he advised my father and younger uncle to choose a field such as medicine or pharmacy where the judicious combination of oriental and western methods could lead to more purposeful and pointed use of the national botanical resources. My mother remembered how, during a particularly severe epidemic of dysentery, my grandfather had got the whole household, including the military servants, to make up traditional medicines to stem the progress of the extremely contagious disease. My eldest aunt always recited a poem in honour of my sub-prefect grandfather that had circulated among the people of Kim Son district (Ninh Binh Province). He had always come to the aid of people in time of famine, which he was able to do as a result of his rank and his sense of purpose. A few years later our aunt Vinh encouraged us to include this poem in the family genealogy.

My grandfather devoted his leisure hours to the translation of this family history stemming from the founder of the family, Nguyen Nhu Do, who had been a grand mandarin at the court of King Le Thanh Tong in the 15th century. According to the historian Phan Huy Chu, Nguyen Nhu Do had, at the age of 19, come second in the doctoral examinations for mandarins of the first rank (*bang nhan*) in 1442. His name is inscribed on the first stele at the Temple of Literature in the capital Thang Long (Hanoi). This had been the first civil service examination organized by the court of King Le Thai Tong after the recovery of independence.

Names of Dam Thu's paternal and maternal ancestors engraved on the stelae at the Temple of Literature in Hanoi and Hue.

Names of Dam Thu's paternal and maternal ancestors engraved on the stelae at the Temple of Literature in Hanoi and Hue.

Due to the fundamental changes in the education system, my grandfather had advised the young people in his clan, including those living in the countryside, to study hard, not only the new National Language, but also French; and to seek a profession. He always repeated the adage that to have a profession was worth more than owning rice paddies.

In colonial times Quang Yen was not only the provincial capital, but also the north-east coast coal-mining region. Both Quang Yen and Hong Gai had pleasant climates and were where the French officers had their holiday resorts and garrisons. The expeditionary marine corps trained there and there were many French civil servants. Since my grandfather did not want to rely on an interpreter, he learned French. He sent both my father and uncle to the Albert Sarrault Lycée after primary school in Hanoi.

My aunt Vinh used to tell the following story: a French civil servant had asked my grandfather to teach him Vietnamese. My grandfather could not be bothered and set one condition. Unless the civil servant could pronounce clearly the three words *bây giờ* (now) *bẫy giờ* (at this time) and *bẩy giờ* (seven hours) there was no point in teaching him Vietnamese. This test defeats most foreigners, and the man did not persist.

My grandfather did not live to see his retirement. He died in Hanoi in 1927 at the age of 57 after three days of fever. He believed that he had caught the common cold during an overnight train ride. He did not want to go to a

doctor. Only my youngest uncle was with him when he died. After returning from Toulouse, my father believed that he had had a cerebral haemorrhage. His life had been nothing but one drama after another.

In his adolescence he had experienced the descent into poverty of his family. Then he had made an unsuitable marriage with my grandmother who was efficient and careful with money, but overly domineering. His career in the French administration had also been dramatic. In his photographs, I noticed that he never seemed to be smiling and that at the age of 59 he resembled a 70-year-old. My mother never recovered from the sudden loss of her father-in-law. No more moral support for her while my father was away pursuing his studies at the faculty of science at Toulouse University. After my grandfather's death, my father had to return to Hanoi.

My mother remembered the first days of her life with her parents-in-law in Quang Yen. She was put through her paces by my grandmother. For example, when it came to the commemoration day for my father's grandmother, she alone had to prepare all the dishes. Certainly, she had learned how to cook before her marriage, but each family has its own habits and customs. At the age of 16 she struggled to live up to her mother-in-law's expectations. Fortunately, my grandfather had come to her rescue and given her encouragement.

When he was off work, he would tell her stories about the family, advised her and shared his desires in relation to the education of his grandchildren. He had selected and written into the family genealogy ten boys names and ten girls names for the grandchildren, chosen for their auspicious qualities. His three grandchildren were born after his death, but my mother kept his aspirations in her heart in order to pass them on to us and did what she could to realize his wishes. He underlined that, whatever the vicissitudes of life, parents should always concern themselves with the instruction and education of their children. Worldly goods might disappear, but spiritual heritage could not be lost. Never permit the children to be idle. Any kind of labour whether manual or intellectual was good. A good job could lead to a stable and dignified existence. In his life he had seen some people, often the eldest son charged with the care of the ancestral altars, live a life of leisure on their inheritance and fall prey to vice, drugs or gambling.

My two grandfathers were colleagues, both district prefects at the provincial level and in addition both great grandfathers had known each other at the court in Hue. They had arranged the marriage of my parents when my father was 16 and my mother 12.

As was the custom, my paternal grandmother had offered various presents appropriate to the season. In an agricultural country that meant rice cakes stuffed with stewed pork (*banh chung, gio lua*) and sweetmeats made of lotus seeds at lunar new year, fried cakes of early, sticky rice (*com*) and orange

persimmons. On the Doan Ngo Festival (5^{th} day of the 5^{th} lunar month) a pair of geese and some peas, and in the autumn, after the harvest, bags of rice and some pigeons. My mother always said that my grandmother had kept a count of everything spent on these ritual gifts. When my mother was 14, my grandmother wanted them to get married at once as she needed a daughter-in-law to look after her and give her massage.

Whatever the influence of French culture, my father accepted the marriage arranged by his parents, out of filial devotion. He considered my mother to be well-educated and her mother to be kind and hard-working. My mother said that since he was curious to see the face of his intended, he had walked back and forth in the street in front of the silk shop where she and her sisters worked for their mother. He saw for himself the happy comings and goings of the young ladies, but still did not know which one was promised to him. Nonetheless, my father refused to go along with the early marriage, telling my complaining grandmother that a girl of fourteen would not yet be fit to take care of her.

At this time, my two aunts were already married. Since my father was far away, my grandmother bullied my uncle Hac Duong who was not yet 16 to get married in his place. My uncle was still living at home and unable to resist the lamentations of my grandmother, so he had no choice but to give in to her wishes. He wrote several very moving letters where he recounted his suffering in face of this premature and imposed marriage. My father had kept these letters and several years later I had found them in his library. As I read them, I wept at the fate of my uncle. He had known that nothing good could come of this mesalliance between the fashionably educated daughter of a wealthy Hanoi businessman and a young, provincial man of the same age.

No one could dissuade my authoritarian and intransigent grandmother and the marriage ended only a few days after the wedding, which was held in Hanoi. After the wedding, the bride was extremely disappointed to discover that her husband was not dressed, as her father was, in European clothes, that was but a simple schoolboy in the upper class of first level and that she would have to live a provincial life in Quang Yen. Unable to bear the notion, when it came time to return to Quang Yen, she made every effort to stay at her own home. When my grandmother refused to allow this, she took a jar of petrol and put in front of her mother-in-law and husband, threatening to end her life. So, my grandparents had to let her go home and that was the end of a poorly matched couple.

After this tragedy, my uncle felt so humiliated that he did not return to school and retired from the world. One day he saw a rowing boat wrecked not far from the port of Quang Yen. Some people who had not learned to

swim were drowned. He asked my grandfather if he could learn to swim in the lake behind our house to avoid any such accidents. He used a banana tree trunk as a flotation device.

The last time he swam was on the anniversary of his grandmother's death. After a lunch at which he had eaten many different foods and a lot of watermelon, he took himself off to swim, while his niece Tam and two soldier-servants watched from the shore. When he left the trunk to go to the bottom of the pond, everyone thought that he had dived. A few minutes passed and then they began to fear that an accident had taken place. The two servants dived in to try to recover him, but it was too late. All efforts were made to revive him, but he had drowned after a good meal. Hac Duong's death caused not only great lamentation, but also considerable remorse in the whole family, particularly since it happened only 4 months after the end of his failed marriage.

A year later, my mother learned this story from her niece Tam, the daughter of my eldest aunt, who had lived with my grandparents for several months. Tam had attended my uncle's wedding as well as his tragic funeral, memories which stayed with her as she had only been 7 at the time.

As for me, many years later, I still feel haunted by this death. After reading the letters my uncle had written to my father I wondered again and again what could have caused this death. Was it an accident or a suicide? Surely it was suicide because this uncle had found himself with no other way out. He had known in advance that this marriage with a fashionable young woman unknown to him would be fatal, but had been resigned to go through with it and had suffered the consequences.

I also thought that the swimming lessons had simply been a set-up by which he could conceal from his parents his desire to end his life. It could hardly be without intention that he had let go his hold of the flotation device, for, if he had felt his life in danger, he would surely have waved his hand to call for help, knowing that the servants were on the shore; but he did nothing. He sank quietly. Thus, all could believe that he had dived. Another possibility is that he slipped and the flotation device came off and at that very moment he realized that for him this was the ideal moment to allow death to quietly overcome him and so he had allowed himself to die.

Since my childhood I have often thought about death. In family photograph albums I saw images of the funerals of my grandfather and of my father. Out of curiosity I asked my cousin Minh about death and she told me that after death we were buried in the ground and lived with the earthworms, which was rather scary for this little girl. I had also seen the illustration in the Fable of La Fontaine where Death is depicted coming for the lumberjack to

mow him down. I was afraid of this skeleton dressed in a black cape and carrying a scythe. I remember that once when I had fallen ill at the age of 7, several rounds of injections had done nothing for me.

At one time I felt that I could not breathe and thought: “If I fall asleep, I will encounter Death, just like the poor lumberjack.” I cried out in terror: “Mummy!”

She was having dinner in the room next door and came running to my bed and patted me on the back. I survived. In the case of my uncle, I thought that he had wanted to die because he was so depressed and could not escape death. However, he did not want his parents to suffer the scandal of a suicide and, out of filial piety, wanted to spare his father the rumours that would fly to the little town where my grandfather had an important position.

Did my grandmother suffer remorse after the death of her son? She was too proud to admit it. In any case she burnt a lot of offerings for his soul at the Kim Lang pagoda which sits on top of the hill above the provincial cemetery. In 1923, the year of his death, there was a large tomb built of brick surrounded by a glazed balustrade and with four frangipani trees in the four corners. My husband and I had visited this tomb in 1971 when we took advantage of the lull in the Nixon bombings to travel to Ha Long Bay. The frangipani trees threw shade over the tomb and their blossoms scented the quiet air of the cemetery. A luxurious tomb now because at that time his parents had only considered marriage to be a duty, neglecting the happiness of the couple. Years later some people who lived by the pond where my uncle had drowned built a small pagoda and every month, we came to say prayers, bring flowers and burn incense on the 1st and the 15th of the lunar calendar.

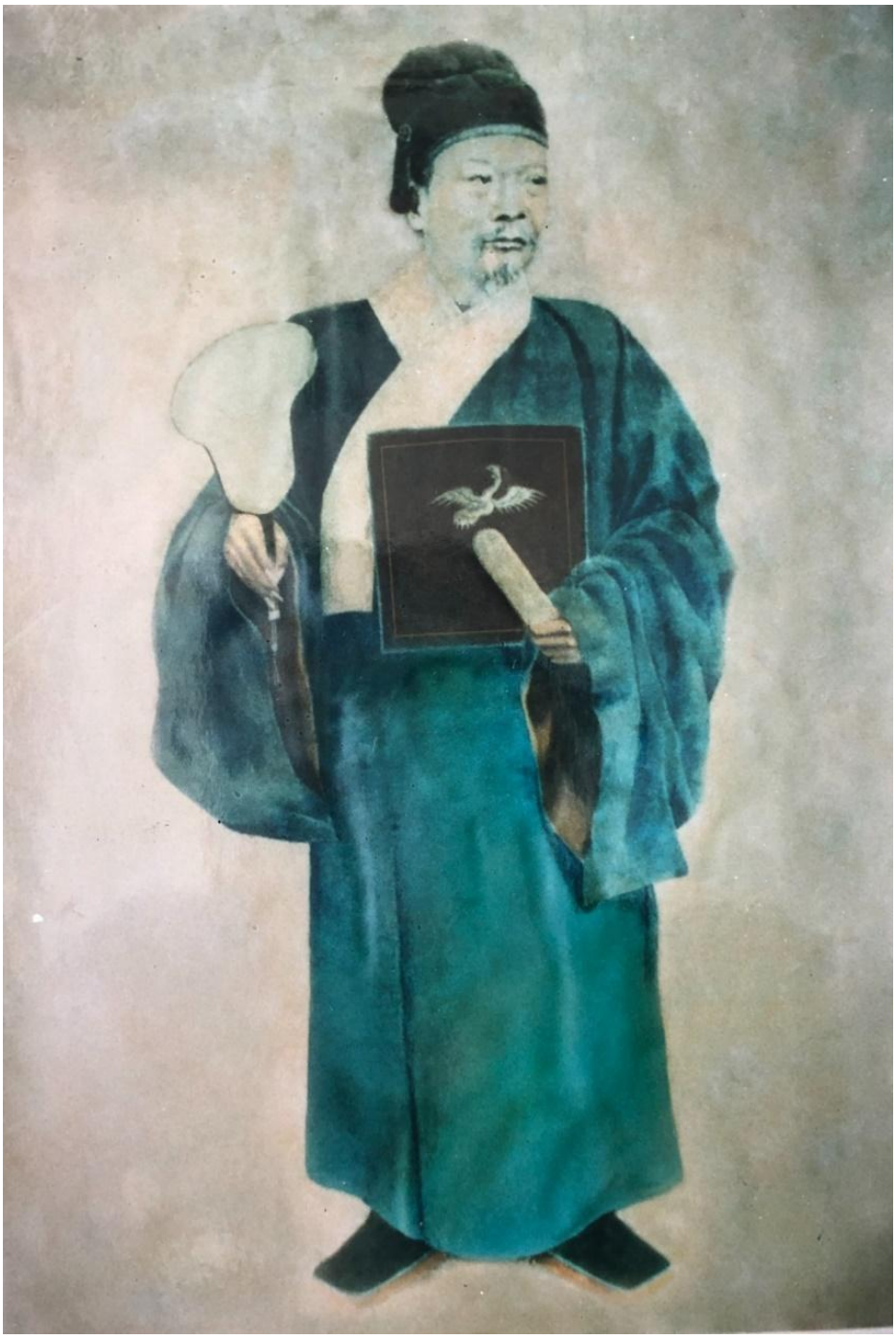
My mother had known nothing of all this. Immediately after my grandfather’s death, the family had returned to Hanoi and from then on never gone back to Quang Yen. There was nothing of us left in that town apart from the little pagoda and stele inscribed in Chinese characters in honour of my grandfather and of the people who had donated the money to build the cemetery and the pagoda. The tomb disappeared when the hillside was removed to make way for the widening of the road to Ha Long Bay. I was told that the remains of my uncle were deposited along with others in a spot on the top of the hill, but that the large limestone stele in front of his tomb was lost.

One year after the death of Uncle Hac Duong, it was my father’s turn to get married. He had only been able to delay the wedding by two years. At 56 my grandmother felt that her strength was fading. She still needed a daughter-in-law to take care of her needs. She also was afraid of dying without having seen the birth of a male heir to continue the family line.

My two aunts had given her six grandchildren and the eldest one had sent two of her daughters to Quang Yen to help. My father would have preferred to have completed his degree before marrying, but given the trauma of my uncle's death, he had failed his exams. My grandmother was adamant, stuck to her point of view and did not budge one inch. She had to have this 16-year-old as a daughter-in-law. We still have a photograph of my father at 20 where he wrote on the back in French: "I am already old". It was true – he had the sombre air of a man of 30.

I now know why we had photographs of funerals, but none of weddings. The reception of the bride from Silk St. to Cotton St. was done in a rickshaw. The bride had a friend of the same age who kept her company. In those days, my mother still followed the custom: her teeth blackened, her hair done up in a velvet turban and wearing a tunic of purple brocade. Since the age of 12 she had helped my grandmother in the little shop, selling natural silk for men and women, since in those days dress codes were still observed.

My maternal grandmother was a native of Kim Bai, the district capital of Thanh Oai in Ha Dong province. This was an area where mulberry trees were grown along the banks of the river. She had lost first her father, then her mother and, thus orphaned, she had managed alone selling silk in the market at Kim Bai. At the age of 24 she married herself to my grandfather, who had already been widowed twice and had three sons to look after. My maternal grandfather was from a family that had been educated mandarins for ten generations, of whom 8 had their names inscribed on the steles of the temples of literature in Hanoi and in Hue. Among them were two first ministers or adjunct ministers and four ambassadors. He was the son of Nguyen Tu Gian who was personnel minister at the court of King Tu Duc and had been awarded his doctorate at the age of 21 in the reign of King Thieu Tri. He was famous for his philosophical dialogs and memorials submitted to the young king, his efforts to preserve independence and for resistance against the French when they attacked Da Nang in 1858.



Portrait painting of Deputy Ambassador Nguyen Tu Gian, Dam Thu's maternal great-grandfather, presented by the Qing court during his mission to Beijing in 1868-1869.

Portrait painting of Deputy Ambassador Nguyen Tu Gian, Dam Thu's maternal great-grandfather, presented by the Qing court during his mission to Beijing in 1868-1869.

Using his prestige as a high court official, he pushed for modernization in the fields of diplomacy, defence, bureaucracy, foreign trade, education, and training of youth etc. He worked closely with the Roman Catholic elite youth such as Nguyen Truong To and Bui Vien, but achieved little. When Bui Vien died suddenly, it was written in his funeral oration that: "Even in the

next life you will not cease from defending the fatherland. Even if your ardent desire to modernize the country was wasted on the mountains and the seas."

After 40 years of official life (1844-84), during a turning point in history, he retired in poverty, leaving no legacy. He spent the last years of his life, up to the age of 67, writing books and giving private lessons. Among his sons, the first to be awarded a doctorate worked in the academy during the reign of Tu Duc and the three others passed into the mandarinate and worked at provincial and district level. My maternal grandfather was his sixth son. He had only achieved mandarin rank after retaking the exams several times. When he married my grandmother, the material support of the family was assured and he could finally concentrate on his studies, obtaining his license in 1900 at the age of 40.

By this time, the colonial administration was already well-established in North Vietnam. He was initially trained in the office of the Senior Resident of Tonkin in Hanoi, after which he was promoted to be sub-prefect, then prefect in a district in the Red River Delta.

Since my grandmother wanted to pursue her own way of life, she did not follow him from post to post; in addition to which he had to carry the burden of raising the two boys who lived always in the care of their father, even after their marriages, having failed the mandarin examinations. My grandmother managed her silk shop and left it to her daughters and her son-in-law in 1940. Upon retirement in the 1920s my grandfather returned to live with his wife in Silk St. It was far from unusual for independent ladies to own and manage their own shops in Silk St. and Hemp St. while their husbands worked in the provincial mandarinate. They stayed in Hanoi and only recovered their husbands upon their retirement to Hanoi. These two streets had another name, that "of the retired mandarins".

I have happy memories of my maternal grand-mother, always kind, industrious and active. I remember her smiling face, her teeth lacquered black like the seeds of cinnamon apples. My grandparents sought a traditional education for their daughters as well as the boys, at least while the use of Chinese characters had not been abolished. The children stayed with their mother when they were very small, then were sent with a nursemaid to the provinces to stay with their father. The girls learned Chinese characters from the age of 5 with their much older brother, who had failed his exams several times and thus devoted his time to educating the family. This first year of instruction was termed the enlightenment of the heart and the perfection of morals. Then from 6 to 12 they, like the boys, learnt the basic canon of Confucian texts in abridged form. This basic formation would be the foundation of their formal education and that of their children in due course.

The eight daughters of Dam Thu's maternal grandmother. Her mother, Nguyen Thi Mau, is fourth from the right. Hanoi 1931.

The eight daughters of Dam Thu's maternal grandmother. Her mother, Nguyen Thi Mau, is fourth from the right. Hanoi 1931.

After this stage, the girls returned to Hanoi to learn domestic economy, housework, culinary arts and trade with my grandmother and their competent cousins. The criteria for educating girls were strict and detailed. They were required to be hard-working and virtuous; needing to watch their behaviour, comportment, gestures and to be careful in their speech, that it be always gracious and appropriate; also, that they should be well-behaved in their interactions with family and relations. After several years of apprenticeship, they were ready to be married and to take responsibility for the household of their husbands. If he should be the eldest, then the responsibility was heavy, with many additional duties to the extended family.

In the age of arranged marriages, whatever the preliminaries, the exchange of gifts, the married couple never discovered each other until the day of the wedding. Before that moment, they had to bow to ancestors, kowtow to the parents and only when these ceremonies had been completed could they finally meet face to face. My mother told me that she could never forget this first night of married life. My father had taken the time to talk to her of his life thus far, of his aspirations for a good relationship and conjugal harmony. He told her of all the troubles inflicted by his mother, but encouraged her to support his mother, however sickly and capricious she might be. For himself, he hoped to be an attentive and understanding husband. My mother was deeply moved by this first night and first exchange with the young man in whom she could repose her confidence for the rest of her life. In one evening all her worries evaporated once and for all.

Since she had been her elder brother's best pupil, he recommended to their father that he send her to the girl's school in Hanoi to get her primary and secondary education. Thus, she could qualify to be a teacher. Sadly, my father got a cold response from his father who said: "What is the point of educating girls? Girls that know *quoc ngu* (the Romanised national script) will simply use it to write letters to their lovers. The place of women is in the family, not in society." She was very disappointed since she would have liked to be self-supporting, like her mother. Unable to become a teacher as she wanted, she nonetheless asked my father whether she could study general knowledge.

From that day my father became not only her companion for life, but also her indulgent preceptor. After the wedding ceremony, my mother went to live with her parents-in-law in Quang Yen, while my father finished his studies in the final year of the mathematics stream of the Albert Sarrault Lycée.

My father loved books and had started to build a library since he entered secondary school. He loved philosophy and literature, but knew that what Vietnam lacked was the spirit of scientific enquiry. He was required to master logic, accuracy, a sense of observation, a taste for experimentation and learning mathematical sciences and experimental sciences under the direction of the teachers at the school, while the cultivation acquired lasted all one's life.

From Hanoi, by means of the postal service, my father regularly sent books, the monthly *Nam Phong*, the magazine *Trung Bac Tan Van* etc. My mother said that among her memories of life in Quang Yen, she remembered in particular the arrival of the post from Hanoi via Haiphong every Wednesday afternoon. She would wait by the pier at Ben Ngu and, as the launch blew its whistle, her heart would begin to pound with joyous anticipation at the letters, newspapers, books from my father – precious spiritual food that would lighten the burden of caring for my irascible grandmother during the week ahead. Life in the provinces was quiet when compared with the lively Silk St., with its tram that traversed the heart of the Old Quarter and her own mother who was always smiling and affable with her customers. She remembered how her days had been packed with activity, only allowing for a short break for lunch at 1pm, with so many itinerant peddlers ready to serve little plates of vermicelli with grilled meat or a bowl of *pho* etc. at any time of day.

The young couple stayed in touch by writing letters. Usually my father was pensive, anxious; parsimonious and sparing with words. With my mother, who had also a taste for reading and wanted his views, he exchanged ideas, gave his opinions on some poem, some play…she had become his intimate friend.

During the three years in Quang Yen between the ages of 16 and 18 she had read many books. She not only read Vietnamese works, but could also access literary works in French thanks to the gifted translations of Nguyen Van Vinh who had rendered La Fontaine's fables, Moliere's plays, including *The Bourgeois Gentleman*, *The Glutton* and *The Hypochondriac*, Balzac's and Victor Hugo's novels into our language. She also read many accounts of the past to the present, of the East and the West in the pages of *Nam Phong* and the other magazines.

In the summer holidays my father brought her a complete set of primary course books in arithmetic, natural science, geography, and history to satisfy her thirst for knowledge. He also taught her how to apply herself to intellectual work. When he left for France to enter university, she had already established a good basis for the autodidact she was and this stayed with her all her life. I think that we owe it to our mother that we learnt from her maternal example at an early age how to access intellectual life and be a good student. As for religion she felt that Buddhism should not be a religion, but rather a Way to be followed that led to wisdom and altruism, while my grandmother was a fervent believer in the cult and all its dogmas and superstitions.

My grandmother thought that she might never have a daughter-in-law and a grandson before she died, but in fact my father predeceased her by 8 years. In memory of my father, for whom my mother had so much gratitude, she supported and cared for her mother-in-law until the latter died in 1945 at the age of 78. I think that the authoritarianism that my grandmother imposed on all her sons made them unhappy and I ask myself why it was that they had all died so young?

At a time of great change, thanks to the farsightedness of my grandfather who found his own Confucian way of life made obsolete, his sons were able to assimilate Western ideas by going to French or Franco-Vietnamese schools without wasting a moment on traditional education. I think they disappeared because they needed to escape the malign forces of my grandmother's evil spirit. There were so many contradictions between the two generations, so that while they revolted at the core of their being, the respect for family meant that they could not act. Only death could release them.

My mother had told us how my father knew well the avarice of his contemporaries both at the lycée and in pharmacy studies and wanted to avoid going into the pharmacy business with him at all costs. However, under my grandmother's influence he had to give in because the shop was in Hemp St. His greedy partner had obtained the favour of my grandmother through flattery. He had worked out precisely how to extract the maximum

profit with the minimum competition. My grandmother approved of his avarice and considered my father to be too generous and overly compassionate to the poor.

According to my mother, my father was not made for business; he was more of a professor who loved research into medicinal plants. Still, he had to do his work well, since his partner limited his involvement to the cash-register and the accounts. My father did everything. He put trust in relationships, even if he lived within the constraint of a partnership that did not suit him. Struck by tuberculosis, the overwork snatching him from this life far too early. In that period the antibiotics invented by Koch to fight the bacillus had not yet been invented.

After my father's death, the accounts of his avaricious partner opened my grandmother's eyes to the truth. My uncle had expected, since he was already in the third year of pharmacy studies, that he would on graduation be my father's successor, but the partner wanted to take total control of the pharmacy as soon as the accounts were settled. The profits were enormous since the pharmacy ranked number 3 in the capital. The partner got it all. My uncle felt overwhelmed and upset and left for France with the object of completing his studies, which in any case required him to spend the last year in France for the final exams. He died of pneumonia in hospital in France a year later, far from his loved ones, at 27 years of age. At home we asked ourselves a lot of questions about this sudden death so far from home.

Since we did not know the facts of the matter, we fell into hypotheses. Perhaps he had caught tuberculosis from my father and wanted to go to France to try to cure himself? Or perhaps he had invented this excuse to go to France where he wanted to be because a month after his death war broke out in August 1939. In any case no one accepted his death at face value. A few months prior he had sent us a photograph in which he appeared smiling and full of life. He appeared to have been in good health. So why had he died so suddenly? My uncle was well built and fit at 1.72 meters, unusually tall for that time. The sad fact was that tuberculosis had already taken the lives of 6 out our family in the last 15 years.

First to go was my father's cousin in 1934, after having 6 children. She was the same age as my father and had wanted to be a teacher, but had been obliged to marry a sub-prefect, graduate of the Ecole National d'Administration (ENA) who was 12 years her senior. She, who had been blooming and intelligent, languished, then died of tuberculosis.

In 1941 the husband of my aunt Vuong, an Indochinese doctor, who had worked many years in the mountains of the North-West, also died of tuberculosis. My aunt Vuong's father-in-law had remained unemployed after graduation, out of opposition to colonial rule. His younger uncle who had joined the patriotic Dong Du (Towards the East) movement went to study in Japan. After the expulsion of the Japanese, he returned to his own country

to find himself in a dead end and ended his life in the garden of my aunt Duong. He poured petrol onto a blanket that covered his body and set fire to it. My cousin Hong Phan and I were struck by this event. My mother had pointed out that in my father's time, the gilded youth, who were well aware of the vicious reprisals carried out by the colonial regime on the revolutionary uprisings of Yen Bai (13 young men guillotined) and of the Nghe Tinh Soviet, were disgusted, but remained impotent; so they caught tuberculosis.

My father had been an active member of the society for the prevention of tuberculosis, but had fallen victim to the disease just like some of his friends. I remember that after the August revolution not a single member of our extended family caught tuberculosis, despite the exigences of life.

The death of Uncle Hac Doanh rocked my grandmother and my mother perhaps even more than that of my father. The last hope and the last source of income for our family gone. The proverb goes: "If you lose your father, you still have an uncle." My mother had counted on the affection for us of my uncle to help with our education, as we were now orphans. He had promised that when he returned from France, he would take care of their education. Like my father he adored children, but in a different way. While my father liked to look after his children and photograph them, my uncle played and sang with the children, put them up on his shoulders while dancing. He also trained us in athletics and we admired him without reserve.

In her grief my grandmother became more and more irascible. Our childish gaiety and laughter exasperated her. She was harder still on my mother, finding fault without cause. She had no sympathy for the premature widowhood of my mother. She was jealous of my mother who had had a well-matched relationship with my father. She had wanted my mother to be simply a vehicle for reproduction, an impeccable servant to my father's family. Nothing more. My father had enjoyed excursions and took photographs. A pharmacist, he had bought a Renault car to travel around. He wanted to take his wife and children to visit his sisters and cousins in the provinces, but my grandmother would not allow it and always pretended to be ill in order to retain my mother at the house.

I had found among the albums of photographs taken by my father and kept in his library, some that he had taken when my sister was two, but not a single one of my mother.

My grandmother had the habit of checking the horoscope of each child when they were born. The horoscope told her that my older brother was incompatible with my father, so she insisted on separating them and sent my brother into adoption by the oldest of my aunts when he was 2 years old. The nurse went with him. In the beginning my father had only accepted this arrangement on the surface, but after my father got infected with tuberculosis my older brother had to remain at my aunt's home during the

summer holidays. This aunt had 9 children and my big brother was the youngest. My brother was lost among this band of cousins, whereas at home he had been on his own. My parents would listen to his babbling, talk to him gently and he would relax. At my aunt's, all the children were terrified of their father who was severe and ruled the roost with a rod of iron. When he came home for holidays my parents found my brother much altered. He clung to his nurse. He cried easily and spoke very little. My brother was obliged to call my uncle and aunt "father" and "mother" and to stay with them during the holidays up until 1945.

After my grandmother's death he could have chosen to leave his adopted family, but sadly in his heart of hearts he never had the same attachment to my mother that I did. My father was clear-sighted and had prepared my mother well so that she would be able to cope after his death. He gave her the opportunity to manage things, to take notes, to check the accounts. He had taught her to treat simple childhood ailments, had shown her how to consult pharmaceutical brochures, use medicines and antiseptics stored in a large safe kept for the pharmacy at our house. She in her turn had taught us this good practice of preventative medicine and treating little accidents before they became serious.

The doctors had given my father at least five years to live until they discovered that the right lung was infected and that it had ceased to function. In the end my father died suddenly after 3 years, preceded by 3 days of fever caused by pneumonia. Before the lunar new year, he had gone to buy ornamental plants from Nghi Tam village on the shores of the West Lake on a very cold day. He caught a cold and should have stayed at the pharmacy and consulted his doctor. When his death was announced, my mother had been busy at home preparing the dishes for Tet. She ran at once to his bedside where the doctor told her that his heart had stopped beating. It was all over.

At once my mother seized his hands with hers and whispered in his ear: "My love and my fidelity are yours. I promise to do my best in my duty to your mother and will strive to raise our children well. I will see that they all go to university, even the girls as per your wishes. May your soul rest in peace."

My mother remembers that after these words, his body shook lightly with three hiccups and then all was still. The funeral was held two days before Tet and a huge crowd attended to say farewell. I was only two when he died and I was not permitted to see his body when it was placed in the coffin. Thus, I continued to believe that he was alive. On some nights, my mother would burst into tears when the doorbell rang and I would shout with joy: "See. Papa is home."

In those days, the law was such that my mother could inherit nothing from my father. In her role as the person responsible for our well-being she managed the resources of my father to raise us. We had three houses to rent,

but during the war this income was insufficient. Fortunately, she was very capable and thrifty. She had had a dowry in cash from my grandmother and had invested it in the silk business with my aunts. With this additional income we lacked for nothing at school. In tight moments she made padded clothing or cakes for her nephew's teahouse, all depending on the circumstances.

I knew that, even though she was a widow, my mother was very reserved in her relations with men. When she paid calls on old friends or my father's cousins, she always took me along, which I happily did, since I knew that my grandmother did not trust my mother and spied on her. In primary school, I, my brother and four cousins shared an evening tutor who was in his final year at the lycée. He was very serious and committed and we worked hard to be good students for him over two years. Once he returned from his native village where he had spent the summer holidays with a large basket of longans, a specialty of that region. We were delighted, but my grandmother was unhappy. She wanted to know why a young student should give such a present without ulterior motive. So, she ordered my Cousin Tan, who was in his class at the lycée, to cease studying with him. When school opened, we had to wait for a new tutor, while Tan was too annoyed to seek one. Then the air raids started to create chaos in Hanoi. We were evacuated and our tutor also.

I considered that adults could not appreciate the anxiety of children. I remember one time when my mother was sent to hospital for a few days for a small surgical operation on her breast, I was so scared that she might die, but shared my anguish with no one. That night I cried quietly thinking that we might soon be orphans. My brother would surely go to my aunt, but what would become of my sister and me? We would surely be separated and sent to different families. What a sad lot to lose both father and mother. How precious my mother was to us.

When I evoke my childhood and what meant most to me, apart from the love of my mother and her protection, I think of my father's library and its two cases of books, where my love of reading was born, of the wonderful gardens that my uncle had cultivated to feed my imagination, of my love for nature, the sensibility for observation and the respect for the variety of things, of the sports equipment that enabled physical exercise. Despite the wars that have destroyed almost all these inheritances, our cultural heritage has endured all my life. Apart from that, what sad memories of my paternalistic, authoritarian, and irascible grandmother.

Six: First Conversations

Deep in remembrance, I had failed to note that the music had stopped. The moon had disappeared from the sky. The air was cool. I returned to bed and immediately fell asleep.

The following day, on the way to the airport, I was surprised to see that in the shops there were only men, seated on the floor. Even the itinerant peddlers pushing their carts of merchandise were male, which was quite different to Vietnam. This was the territory of Islam.

I knew that Pakistan had broken off from India, creating a Muslim state, while India remained a country of many faiths, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and others. Here I rarely saw women in the street. They covered their heads in large scarves, only permitting their eyes to be seen. In Silk St in Hanoi there were also Muslims, who wore traditional costume with a velvet cap, the men looking after the shops and the women not to be seen. Even the Indian shops named *Bombay* were run by men in European dress. At the Chaffangeon shop on Trang Tien Street I had met four young Indian girls who lived near to us and dressed like the French. They sold high-quality confectionery. Each Sunday I used to admire these gracious young ladies with their wavy hair on their way to mass dressed in saris with flowing veils. They were naturalized French from Pondicherry.

This was the second day of my journey and the weather was fine; not a cloud in the sky. The airplane flew along the coast of the Gulf of Oman. White sailboats could be seen floating in groups along the inshore. The colour of the deep sea was the same as that of the sky. One could not have distinguished the sea from the sky, were it not for the occasional appearance of a steamer, leaving a wake of foam behind. How peaceful it was. I was happy simply to watch the sky and the ocean, spread out below without any cloud to impede my view.

I remembered the voyages that my father, uncle and brother had all made by steamer from Saigon to Marseille, in third class, taking a month. They had all suffered from terrible sea sickness on the Indian Ocean. The road in search of western civilization was as trying as that once taken in the time of my great grandfather when the candidates for the civil service examination had to walk on foot across mountains and sand dunes from Hanoi to reach the court in Hue. Their dream was to be awarded a doctoral degree, to be ambassador to China and then a minister at the Court. My great grandfather had achieved these three ambitions, but at the end of his life he said that he felt bitterly regretful, then died without having explained why.

After the Gulf of Oman, we overflew the Persian Gulf and saw on the Iranian side, ancient Persia, an important country in the west of Asia, rich in natural resources. Then we stopped in Bahrain on the Arab archipelago. Bahrain was a tax-free port ruled by the British, known for cheap cigarettes. Before I left home my cousins in France had advised me to use up my Sterling buying cigarettes. I saw that my neighbour and all the other passengers did this, so I followed suit. Some of the passengers were amused to see a young Vietnamese woman who did not smoke, carrying boxes of Craven-A, with a big black cat on a red ground, 555, as well as two large cartons of Philip

Morris under her arm. I was embarrassed and blushed red to the roots of my hair. We flew over the Arabian Peninsula all afternoon. I attempted to spot camels, but the brilliant white sands blinded me and I closed the shade of the porthole.

“Do you smoke?” my neighbour asked.

“No thanks.”

“Would you mind?”

“Not at all.” I shook my head, thinking that he was indeed courteous to have asked me, while the whole cabin was already full of the light perfume of the English cigarettes. I looked at him out of the corner of my eyes. He lit up, dragged deeply and then exhaled a little, shapeless cloud. From Bahrain to Beirut the ashtrays were full of poorly extinguished stubs.

In my disappointment I pulled a notebook from my bag and scribbled a map of Asia from the Far East to Europe. I marked the locations and names of the towns at which we had stopped without omitting the route the steamers took with the ports of Saigon, Singapore, Columbo, Djibouti, Port Said and Marseille. I remembered these names since my father had brought back souvenirs which he had bought from each stop on the voyage – statuettes of monkeys, elephants etc. From earliest childhood I had been fascinated by geography and the maps I found in the Little Illustrated Larousse dictionary and my father’s atlases.

“Are you good at geography?” asked my neighbour?

“As a child I liked geography. I was often sick and for lack of toys I read many books during my frequent convalescences.”

“I understand.”

“In elementary school I learnt by heart the French rivers: the Seine, Loire, Garonne and the Rhone. Also, the mountain ranges such as the Alps, Pyrenees and Massif Central.

“Have you ever hoped to see them for real?”

“No, neither my mother nor me. We would get postcards from my father or uncle. That was enough for me.”

Kindly, my neighbour assured me that: “Look, you will get the chance to see all these places. The French railway system in very efficient. I also like to travel. That is why I sought a three-year contract to work as an electrical engineer in Hanoi. I would like to see Vietnam, but because of the war I could only visit Hanoi, Haiphong and Ha Long Bay.

I cheered up and insisted that ours was a peaceful nation, pointing out that the names of most of the provinces in Vietnam included the word for peace, calm and tranquillity (Hoa Binh, Thai Binh, Quang Yen, Vinh Yen, Quang Binh, Binh Thuan etc.). I observed that my neighbour had white and elegant hands, the mark of a scholar. I could not imagine a rifle or a revolver in these hands. I surprised myself with this observation. With every step I was growing in distance from my former way of life and responding to that which was all around me.

“Which faculty will you join in Paris?”

“I am going to the Sorbonne to study maths, physics and chemistry.”

“I didn’t realize that girls also studied the mathematical sciences. In my country most women study the arts or foreign languages.”

“Truth to tell, I do like literature, history and geography, but in my extended family we all study either engineering or maths. Also, my mother and father both said that our nation lacks the spirit of scientific enquiry. We require a new way of thinking and not just knowledge and administrative skills. For me Marie Curie and Louis Pasteur are my idols for their contribution to humanity.”

The neighbour agreed. “Will you be at the City university?”

“It seems that it is hard to get a place there. I will initially lodge with my aunt, but her home is far from the campus so I will have to take the metro to get there. I face many challenges.”

Time passed quickly and now the airplane descended into Beirut, the capital of Lebanon, which is on the Mediterranean. It was dusk. We dined on the terrace of a magnificent restaurant. Perhaps the airline made a special effort, serving steak, fries, wine, cheese and fruit, since this was the last meal of the journey and therefore the last opportunity to make a good impression. Also, for the first time in the journey I had a kind companion with whom to share this delicious meal. The steak was as thick as my hand, yet tender, yielding a stream of red juice with every slice. It was so good, but how I struggled with my knife and fork. I could not let my companion see my clumsiness, so I watched what he did and imitated the way he cut the meat.

Seeing my confusion and lowered eyes he told me how he had struggled with chopsticks and held one in each hand the first time he had encountered them.

The cool wind off the Mediterranean was comforting.

“Lebanon was under French mandate from 1920-1943,” explained my neighbour. “It became independent during World War 2. That’s why the food shows French influence.”

“I really like the steak.”

The dessert was even more delicious with fruits from the Mediterranean coast. My neighbour smiled as I chose a bunch of grapes after hesitating over what to take from the huge basket of oranges, apples and fragrant grapes. I remembered the bunches of grapes for sale in Sail Street in Hanoi, carefully displayed in the windows of Chinese shops. They were a luxury. As I child I had only tasted dried raisins packed in tiny boxes the size of a match box.

“Take as much as you want” he encouraged me. “These are better than those in Paris. They are fresh. You’ll see in the university canteen; things are very different.”

He told me then about meals in the canteen, the queues, the plates in the hand, the eyes searching for a place to sit, the race for each empty seat. I listened carefully. He was my first reliable source of information on life in France. Now I regretted not having got to know him earlier in the journey, so that I could learn more. Here I was, completely outside my comfort zone. All I knew of France was taken from the novels of Victor Hugo, Anatole France and Alphonse Daudet.

Seven: A storm in the Mediterranean

I experienced a sharp stab of regret as we left the restaurant to return to the airplane. I was sad that we could not have spent the night peacefully in the cool Beirut air, rather than being shut up again in the gloomy cabin. I could make out nothing in the darkness. I would so much have loved to have seen the Greek islands, the legends of which were already engraved on my mind. How much I would have liked to have caught a fleeting glimpse of Athens with its splendid monuments, glories of Greek civilization, in the early morning sun. In my mind I turned over the names of the philosophers Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and the mathematicians Thales, Pythagoras, Euclid. In the holidays I had read the Odyssey in French. It was fascinating, this account of the wanderings of Ulysses on his way home to Ithaca, his home, after the Trojan war, which had lasted ten years. I did not care for the Iliad, but had happily reread the Odyssey several times.

I was drowsy from the red wine and do not know for how long I slept. I woke in a start as they instructed us to put on our seatbelts. The airplane was shaking violently. I opened the shade of the porthole. Clouds sped by at an astounding speed lit up by flashes of lightening, followed by great cracks of thunder. I trembled. It was a storm. I had always been frightened of storms. As a child I had waited for the month of June with its nightly storms with

anxiety. When the sky lit up, I had crushed myself against my mother and thrust my fingers into my ears to avoid hearing the growling thunder. However, we had been indeed safe and sound at home, compared with this.

I imagined that we were the targets of Zeus's fury, as the god of rain and lightning played with our terror. My skin broke out in gooseflesh and my knees trembled when I saw the mechanic come up behind us to secure the screws of some panels that had become loose. My dear God! What was to become of us? What if the wind found its way in through the openings in the panels or the lightening hit our fuselage? We might plunge into the sea and become fodder for fish. To lose one's life uselessly at 18. In the flower of youth. All my dreams disappeared in an instant. Unable to say goodbye to my mother or my loved ones. What a terrible fate. This, despite the fact that all my friends had told me that I was fortunate to have the chance to study overseas, with bright prospects. I felt a sense of regret. I told myself: "I don't want this; it would not be fair." It would be too stupid to die here, in this airplane, after all the trials, bombings, prison, torture. I had never imagined violence like this.

All of a sudden, I felt a power that threw me up as if I had been on one end of a swing and then dropped me back down again, causing the contents of my stomach to be thrown up. So much for the evening festivities. I vomited the whole lot. Everything that had tasted so good became under the power of digestive juices a ghastly mess. Throughout the cabin were heard the sound of people being sick. I had no idea how long this joke of the god of Olympus might last, but just as I had given up all hope, life had become insignificant and my body a bedraggled rag, the loudspeaker announced: "We are about to land in Athens." "We are saved," I muttered to myself. I hastily wiped my face and stayed stuck in my seat, exhausted.

Already up, my neighbour waved at me encouragingly and said in a friendly voice: "Put on your jacket. We are getting out. It is cold here." Like an obedient child I slowly put on the jacket and took a white woollen scarf that I had knitted for the trip and wound it round my head. I wanted to be last to leave the cabin. Outside the Mediterranean wind whipped my face and the scarf was blown from my head. I let go of the handrail, grabbed the scarf in time, but fell. My companion had anticipated my weakness and was right behind. His strong hand grabbed me by the arm and helped me down the last steps. The he told me as if it were an order: "Let us try to run. The cafeteria is quite close." As we ran, with him leading me by the arm, I remembered the time when I had won first prize in a race at the stadium in Hanoi and was inspired to run faster. Once seated on a chair in the warm cafeteria I began to pant loudly. Perhaps my companion found me to be overheated as he asked: "Are you okay?"

"I am saved" I replied between pants and waved my hand at him.

“A cup of hot coffee will make you feel better.”

A waitress gave us some slices of raisin bread, condensed milk, and black coffee. I watched my companion as he mixed coffee and milk and put the cup down before me. My heart started to beat faster. How strange to find that the heart really is the seat of the emotions. Until now no one other than my mother had touched me so keenly and it was this young man. I felt the need to cry, remembering my father who had died before I could remember him. However, my mother had told me that he always wanted to take care of his children himself, rather than remaining aloof to preserve Confucian paternal authority. I was so sad to have lost him at such a young age. How much I had suffered for the lack of him. My companion broke the silence:

“Would you like some raisin bread with your coffee? You are already in Europe. Time to get used to eating the local food.”

I held the cup of good, hot coffee in my two hands and began to sip at it. The heat passed through the cup into my frozen fingers. It was comforting to have some milk in my empty stomach. I seemed as if we had, after hours of fear and horror, escaped with our lives and I recovered my optimism, becoming a little more tolerant. My discrimination based on race and gender was banished and I dared to address my companion:

“Do you have a brother or a sister?”

“I have one brother and one sister, both much younger than I.”

“Oh! It seems that you really know how to take care of others.”

“My father is a hydraulic engineer. He was often away from home, so I helped my mother to take care of my younger sister.”

Seeing the spontaneity of his responses, I thought: “We are taught to always be careful of men, but I find that he is sincere. He treats me like his younger sister.”

I was more relaxed when the loudspeaker announced that our departure would be delayed for another hour. My companion went in search of two more cups of coffee and some bread. I regained my spirit and began to chat:

“You know, just now I thought that we were about to die. I have faced death three times in my life. Once in childhood when I was seriously ill. I thought that Death was a white skeleton covered with a black cape and armed with a scythe, which would come to my bedside to harvest my life. The second time it was when bombs fell not far from our primary school. The earth trembled under our feet, many of us cried and the nun said:”Pray to the Virgin Mary.” Suddenly we heard the prayer: “Hail Mary, full of Grace, the Lord be with you…” This time…”

My companion smoked in silence. He listened to my babbling and smiled kindly from time to time. This helped me to express my thoughts:

“You know that, during the storm, I had thought that when flying over Greece, Zeus, the lord of Mount Olympus, had seen in this airplane soldiers who had taken part in war crimes against the local population and destroyed nature…so Zeus punished us with that appalling storm. His message to us was:”It would be better to live in peace and preserve nature. Remember this: he who sows the wind, reaps the tempest.”

My companion sat up in his chair and put out his cigarette. He looked me straight in the eyes and replied: “But you and I are civilians. We have done harm to no one. Why should Zeus punish us?”

My French was not really good enough to argue. I simply pondered how, in the Odyssey, Homer had wanted to send us a message: what good was the rancour and anger of Poseidon, god of the sea, who had disrupted Odysseus’s voyage? Despite all the detours and suffering, Ulysses had finally made it back to his home where he found his father, his wife, his son by means of the courage, will and his wiles aided by the goddess Athena, who accompanied him everywhere. Overcoming resentment, lust, arrogance and greed, human virtues such as family love, faithfulness and constancy in love triumphed over all.

Instead, I said: “I think that thanks to our presence Zeus abated his anger; otherwise lightning would have struck our fuselage and we would have fallen to the bottom of the sea and become the prey of the fishes.”

My companion burst out laughing and I also laughed. This was the first time I had laughed since leaving Vietnam. He lit another cigarette. While he smoked, I drank my coffee in little sips. After a while, he said:

“I lived through World War 2. My grandmother had a house with two floors in the countryside. During my childhood, in the summer holidays she would take in all the children. We would search for mushrooms in the clearings of the forest, fish and collect shrimps in the streams. During the German Occupation, the Nazis took over this house and that was the end of the happy days. War overturned everything.”

I listened to him, thinking that he could not be in favour of the reconquest of Indochina. It must have been lonely for him all alone in Hanoi. I said to myself that if there had been no war, according to the accord of 14th September 1946, Vietnam would have welcomed experts and technicians, giving priority to French nationals in a spirit of cordiality and mutual confidence. It was a great shame that the fighting had introduced tension into the Franco-Vietnamese relationship. It was all so complicated. Wars are truly sad. I continued:

“You know that our people have always desired peace at all times. For example, we have a province named Ninh Binh (which means tranquillity) where there was a big battle in 1951 and the young Lieutenant Bernard de Lattre, only son of General de Lattre, was killed at his post on the top of the little mountain of Non Nuoc. It needs to be pointed out that Non Nuoc is a very famous beauty-spot where king Tu Duc and many other poets inscribed their poems. The French army had made a serious mistake in choosing this spot to build their provocative base and in displaying their machine guns aimed at the farmers who worked the fields in that area.

In 1952 I saw the photographs of the funeral of General de Lattre, who had died in Paris, in *Paris-Match.* It was sad to see the pictures of his widow, who had lost her husband and her only son. If there had been no war, there would have been no deaths of young people on either side.”

I hesitated, unsure whether I had gone too far. Why had I chosen this young man who was unknown to me to discuss these delicate problems?

“Indeed, it is sad.”

We spoke no more until the loudspeaker announced that it was time to return to the airplane and continue to Marseille. It was still night and it was raining. We had seen nothing of Athens when the airplane regained cruising altitude. Farewell Greece. I regretted having missed the opportunity to see the famous sites that I had known about for so long. I thought that if there were a spirit of fraternity among the peoples of this world it would be better to organize Olympic Games and to expend energies and power in the arenas of sport and athleticism, than to make wars of domination and exploitation of the weak by the strong. The coffee I had drunk prevented me from sleeping, but I felt completely deflated.

Eight: The Final Stretch

We landed at Marseille airport in a morning mist. The air was cool, but not cold. Unlike our other ports of call, I was immediately familiar with this town. My cousin Khuong had often spoken to us of Marseille where he had worked as an interpreter attached to the unskilled workers (ONS) recruited to support France during World War 2. We remained at the restaurant in the terminal building, where we were given a croissant and a cup of coffee. After this breakfast I said to my companion:

“The croissant and the milk are both better here than in Hanoi. One of my cousins has a patisserie in Hanoi, but his croissants are not as good as these.”

“To be sure, the butter and milk are fresher here. Also, there is the craftsmanship.”

I had been told that the French in the metropolitan country were more polite than those in the colonies. They were not so haughty. In fact, this depends on to whom one is talking. The teachers and doctors did not behave like the other ordinary colonials or colonial administrators. For example, we had a high opinion of Yersin, the Franco-Swiss microbiologist who had dedicated his life to epidemiology and stayed in Nha Trang up until his death. There are streets named for Yersin in Hanoi, Saigon and Nha Trang. Yersin discovered the special climate of Dalat and created the remarkable village there. I remember that, while doing kindergarten classes at the St. Mary Institute, I got to know Sister Francoise, who was very nice, always smiling and very indulgent. If I have remembered any French nursery rhymes and songs, it is thanks to her. In those lessons, the daughters of the French administrators were terrible. They treated us as if we were 2nd class natives, while we, the "annamites" were the better students.

I stopped talking. I felt that perhaps it was not fair to say all this to a Frenchman who was very kind to listen to me. My companion seemed sad. He smoked in silence. I bent over my cup of coffee and stirred in some sugar, saying nothing more. Heaving a sigh, I continued:

"One of my cousins knows both Chinese characters and the French language. He worked at the French School of the Far East in Hanoi. He had noticed that the French experts were too courteous and too modest. They truly understood our culture. The behaviour of these scholars was exemplary and we had a cordial and friendly relationship with them. I hope that in the future, when the war is over, there will be a new generation whose ideas are not based on an obsession with the glories and grandeur of empire and who will develop relations with us based on mutual comprehension and shared confidence."

My companion looked me straight in the eyes, saying:

"I agree with you."

In the depths of my heart, I felt that I had discovered a fraternal spirit who understood me. Yet he was a stranger to me. I did not even know his name. We were not accustomed to remembering the names of strangers. I remembered how we had had two French neighbours up until 1952, yet never learned their names. The villa to the right of ours belonged to the widow of an officer. She lived alone in this small villa with a cook and a gardener, who shared the ground floor. Her garden was larger than ours, but had only a lawn and several tropical trees that provided shade. After her husband died in 1940, she lived a reclusive life. We called her "Madame Widow of the Military Inspector." From time to time, we would see her dressed in a black dress with a black veil wound around her black hat. She would walk alone to do her shopping at the French shops in Trang Tien St.

On the other side of us was Krug City, a housing development designed by the architect Krug who was involved in the designs for the Indochina Bank. He had bought a piece of land located between Boulevard Rialan (Phan Chu Trinh) and Boulevard Gambetta (Tran Hung Dao). He had built many villas, but also some "tube houses" which were rented out to seven Indian families from Pondicherry. When Krug had returned to France, he had left several villas in this development to his concubine and her Eurasian daughter. In Vietnamese we called this development "*ngõ tây Cú"* which meant the"the street of the Frenchman owl," the word *cú* means owl, but is also pejorative and thus the name indicates that Krug was either not much liked or that it is human nature to make a mockery of things.

The wealthy Eurasian daughter was very arrogant, while her husband was rather nice, according to their servant. He was called Mr. No. 10 because of the number of the house. The couple had no child, but a maidservant for the lady of the house and a boy for the master, as well as a cook and a driver. This lady was visited every week by appointment by a flower-seller and a vendor of lace, who wore traditional costume and advertise their wares in front of her door. The flower-seller brought gladioli, snapdragons and marigolds, while the lace-vendor carried her wares in a large basket on her head.

We had no interaction with our French neighbours, not even a greeting. Both sides seemed indifferent to the other. After the retreat of the troops of the French expeditionary force from the frontier provinces of Cao Bang, Bac Kan and Lang Son in October 1950, the French residents of Hanoi realized that the colonial era was drawing to a close. They all sold their houses and moved to Saigon or Dalat; or returned to France. It was strange how my brief encounter with this French engineer had so affected me. He was unknown to me, not even his name. His was like the appearance of a shooting star that lights up the darkness.

During the final flight, the airplane flew above the clouds, so we could see nothing below. The sky was grey. I felt incredibly sad. On the day of my departure, I was nostalgic, thinking about my country and my family, but now, at the end of the journey, I wondered why I was overcome by a sadness that oppressed the heart in my chest. I hesitated to say goodbye to my companion, for fear that my emotion would cause me to lose my voice. I leant towards him, saying in a low, strangled voice:

"I thank you for having helped me through the difficult moments. Without your help I do not think I could have managed. Travelling alone to a foreign land. Now I must write a letter to my mother, in time to send it as soon as we land in Paris. Today is her 45th birthday."

"Don't mention it. It was my pleasure to have been your companion during the journey." He replied softly, smiling.

Out of politeness he now got out a book and began to read, while I started to write a letter to my mother on some paper I took out of my bag:

Written in the airplane from Marseille to Paris 6th November 1953.

Dearest Mummy,

I remember that today is your 45th birthday and yet I am not with you, at home to present you with my good wishes. Far from you as I am, I know how much I miss you and above all how grateful I am for your kindness and your self-abnegation for all of us orphans ever since the death of our father. Now I am the last one to go to university as our father had desired. Not only did you take care of our education and our instruction, but you also inspired us with your example in tackling the challenges of widowed life in this time of dragged-out warfare. You showed us how to love, to have a positive outlook and to overcome whatever challenges, painful as they might be.

I put down my pen. It was hard to write down all the thoughts that flooded into my head. At the same time the confusion caused by my imminent separation with my companion overcame me. More than ever, I was bothered by the noise of the engines. We were getting closer to Paris. My chin in my hands, my elbows on the table, I heaved a big sigh. I tried to concentrate on my mother alone and addressed her with these thoughts:

Mother, you were forced to take up the role played by our father. I know that you had to deal with all kinds of demands, but you always guided us in the right direction. Without intelligence you could not have managed this double role and we your children could not have been good pupils. I feel blessed to have a mother who, while never herself having been to school, who knew no foreign languages herself, could nonetheless encourage us to learn both French and English. Otherwise, I would have been deaf and dumb in the company of all the people in this airplane. You knew our needs and found the means to satisfy them."

The journey was coming to an end, but I would have liked time to stop and for us to go on floating in space. I dreaded the coming separation from my travel companion. I tried to press on with the letter:

Please do not worry too much about your daughter. With the baggage you have provided I feel ready to make a good start in life, confident in my own ability to meet whatever challenges come my way. I thank you so much for your support. For myself, having escaped danger, I think about you all the time and about the intensifying war. Mummy, I know that you are Buddhist, but you only go to the pagoda once a year at lunar new year. Buddhism for you is not a religion, but a Way to follow, as with Confucianism. You are an auto-didact, you develop without cease your intellectual abilities and at the same time create for yourself an interior space of spiritual richness that I admire and try to emulate. You

know all about the immutable law of cause and effect in Buddhism. I remember an Indian saying: "Love that grows from wisdom is an ineffable treasure." We are indeed fortunate to have received love from a mother like you.

Dear Mother. I know that you were unable to become a teacher as you had hoped, but in our family, you were the real fountain of wisdom. My father laid the ground for you to take up this role after his death. In a few minutes, the airplane will descend into Paris and my brother will be there to meet me. I end my letter here and offer you my very best wishes for a happy birthday.

Your loving daughter,

Dam Thu

I glanced at my watch. We would be in Paris in half an hour. I have no memory of what happened next, either in the airplane or at Le Bourget airport. I forgot all about my travelling companion. I saw him no more. Melancholy overcame me. It seemed to me that I had not even said goodbye when parting from him. I feared the moment of separation. As at the time of leaving Hanoi, I closed up like an oyster, indifferent to everything. I was silent and focused on my troubles. However, the tenderness and solicitude of this unknown companion remained with me, in the depths of my heart, in my soul. I guarded it like a precious little pearl, living and fragile. I showed it to no one.

Two weeks after my arrival in Paris, I got a letter from my sister. She told me that my mother had been delighted by my first letter. In her first letter to me she told me that she had been moved, because my departure had reminded her of the time when my father was in Toulouse. Of the three children, I reminded her of him the most because of my love of literature and my way of expressing myself.

Two months later, I was already used to the commute from rue Saint Jacques to my course at the Sorbonne in rue Cuvier. At the end of February 1954, my sister announced that a summons to appear in front of the military tribunal had arrived at our house. The governor's office in North Vietnam did not know that the internal security department had already given me a visa to study in France. Then the battle of Dien Bien Phu had broken out with huge press coverage in March. Finally, the peace that we had all yearned for was achieved at the Treaty of Geneva in July 1954

Nine: Three Years of Exile

When I left Vietnam, I could not possibly have imagined what my student life would be like. It was chilly in Paris and so my brother took me to buy a coat, boots and other warm clothing. My mother wanted me to wear my national identity with pride and had prepared for my trunk six *áo dài* (traditional Vietnamese tunics) with black and white trousers for the

different seasons. It was pleasant to have my cosy padded tunics outside, but not practical when one went inside where there was central heating. So, in winter I wore a pair of woollen trousers and Vietnamese tunics in the other seasons, but I never wore a dress or a skirt like the French female students of this period.

Nostalgia was like a pregnancy for me. In Hanoi it only took me 5 minutes by bicycle or 15 minutes on foot to get to the university. At the Faculty of Sciences in Hanoi I matriculated with only about ten others, while in Paris there was a long queue to register for classes. I was surrounded by young students, mostly taller than I, so that I had to raise my head to avoid suffocation. I was a week or so late for the start of class. When I arrived for my first class, I was taken aback by the size of the crowd in the big lecture theatre at the Sorbonne. There were perhaps 300 seats, but many students were left standing. It was hard for me to find a seat at the bottom, close to the lecturer, so that I could hear what they were saying. I tried arriving 30 minutes early, but other students had already reserved the best seats with their scarves. I was completely alone, without a friend in the world. What was I to do? The only solution was to sit at the foot of the steps. It took me an hour to get to the university: first, 15 minutes' walk from my aunt's house in rue Picpus to Nation station. From Nation to Denfert-Rochereau was 14 stops, then another 3 stops, after an interchange that took a while to find the correct line. That made 40 minutes in the metro, Finally, ten minutes' walk to the Sorbonne. I remember one winter morning: it had snowed and I left home before dawn, my shoes crunching the fresh snow. I was well wrapped up, but my eyes stung. The first time I thought the snowflakes graceful as they danced in the air, but once on the ground I thought them less pleasant.

I had to learn to queue. If I left a lecture at noon, the queue at the canteen in the School of Mining, which was ten minutes away, was very long. The food service was fast, but one had to carry one's plate for a long time while waiting for a seat to become available; then, once seated, one had to eat quickly as others were waiting. I struggled to use the not-very-sharp knives to cut the meat. In those days there were no modern lecture halls. In the afternoon, between the maths and physics classes I had to run from rue Saint-Jacques to rue Cuvier by means of rue des Ecoles.

The French with their long legs got there first and grabbed all the best seats in the lecture hall, whereas I, a stray doe, how could I find anywhere to sit in that dense forest, even on the stairs or at the back, because here the space was smaller? If at the back, I could not hear the lecturers. It seemed to me that some students did not take their studies seriously. They came for the fun and chatted endlessly with their neighbours during lectures.

I remember once how a chemistry lecturer, Mr. Wiemann, had had enough of the disruptive chatter of a couple of students, interrupted the class and walked to the back of the lecture hall to demand to see their student ID cards. When he arrived the two miscreants had already resumed the required posture and he could not identify who they were.

On his way back down, he said: “If you love talking, you would be better off at the Faculty of Law.” But the analysis lecturer did not care what the students did. He gave his lectures striding from one side of the stage to the other, without consulting his notes. As a foreigner I didn’t pick up much at these long hours of lectures. I had to go to the St. Genevieve library next to the Pantheon, not far from the Sorbonne, to find the course books in higher mathematics suggested by my brother. The librarians were very conscientious and I was happy to work away in the library thanks to the studious atmosphere and the central heating in winter.

My student life in Paris was unimaginable to me. I was alone, but more importantly I was not prepared for the mathematics course, because in the 2^{nd} part of the baccalaureate I had chosen experimental science. In this I was simply following the example of my father and brother, who both thought that this line of study fostered a scientific spirit and logic.

Ten: The Life-Saving Ring

Two weeks later, during a laboratory session in practical chemistry, I made a new friend.

Chemistry practical work in MPC

Chemistry practical work in MPC She was in the same group as I was. Perhaps she noticed my hangdog expression and initiated a conversation. Her name was Marion Pierrard, a native of Charleville. Since the age of 12, she had

been the only daughter of a widowed father, while I, from Hanoi, had lost my father at the age of 2. Our friendship was swiftly formed and has endured throughout our peripatetic lives.

Marion was a boarder at the Ursuline Serviam Institute in the rue Gay-Lussac, next to the Luxemburg Gardens and to the Sorbonne. After lectures in the afternoon, we wandered through the streets as far as the Serviam Institute and exchanged ideas, shared preoccupations.

Once, I spoke to her of my worries concerning my next move to Robinson near Seaux where my aunt's family lived. Not only would the journey be very tiring, but the new house was too small for me to have my own room. Marion then found out that a young student was about to leave Serviam and wanted to know whether I would like her to introduce me to the Mother Superior, who was like a real mother to her. I was like a person in a shipwreck who comes across a life-saving flotation ring.

My morale was much improved once I had my own room in Serviam, where the atmosphere was studious and my close friend Marion was close by. No more queuing for lunch. No more commuting by crowded metro. Furthermore, I had the leisure to explore the works of Hemingway, Jack London, Leo Tolstoy and others because there was a library on the premises with works by celebrated authors from all over the world.

Without this I could have been overwhelmed by all the maths, so much time and effort did I have to commit to it. After lunch or dinner, we were permitted to invite friends to our rooms for coffee or tea. Each one of us could use a kettle, as long as we did not exceed the allocated time for each month. I appreciated the consensual discipline of the Boarding House. We even had a large reception room for visitors. One day I returned from my lectures to a pleasant surprise – a vase of brilliant anemones on my desk, placed there for my 20th birthday.

I had other friends at Serviam including Francoise Luton was preparing for the entrance exam of the school of chemical engineering in rue Lavoisier. She was from Clermont-Ferrand. I had got on with her from the first encounter at dinner. She lent me her maths books, which I found most useful. Her job was to answer the telephone during meals. At the first ring she leapt up, went to the cabin and called out the name of the person who was the recipient of the call. I found this strange because she herself never got a call, but the mother of another Francoise who worked for the telephone company in the provinces always called her daughter at mealtimes.

Another friend was Bernadette Moreau, from the Vosges and gifted with a good voice. At the start of every meal, she sang the note and everyone else followed in singing a blessing in praise of all the farmers of the world. She taught me various French folksongs which I still have by heart. I often sat at

the same table, as I loved to hear her talk about psychology. She was obliged to do three years of psychology before joining the faculty of medicine to become a paediatrician. At Serviam, I was overjoyed to enter French culture and to practice my French. In my opinion it would be a shame to live in a Vietnamese group, speaking Vietnamese and keeping away from the French as we did in Vietnam.

After I had been about two weeks at Serviam, it was Easter. All the students returned to their homes, while I stayed at Serviam. I could not get used to the quiet. I occasionally met two black cats in the staircase or in the dining room. My brother had to prepare intensively for his exams and could not spare the time to accompany me on walks, so I went alone. The mother superior, Marie-Angele, understood my loneliness and my sadness. One day she invited me to give the nuns a talk about Vietnamese culture and gave me some time to prepare. I did not know where to begin, but she encouraged me to concentrate on literature, music and dance.

This task gave me an opportunity to forget my homesickness. It was quite a challenge for me to give a talk in French. To introduce the literature, I translated a few proverbs and folksongs. I talked about the Tale of Kieu, masterwork of the mandarin poet Nguyen Du in the 18th century, of which my cousin Hao had given me a copy. This popular work appeals to all ranks of society from the well-educated to the illiterate. Some even know the whole poem by heart. What is really interesting is that the book can be opened anywhere and after reading a few verses, one will find an adequate answer to one's question.

In the case of dance, I was challenged by the fact that we have many ethnic groups in Vietnam, all with their own song and dance traditions. I knew a little about the Cheo opera found in the Red River delta, thanks to our evacuation in March 1945 to a village where there was a large annual festival in honour of the Trung sisters, national heroines of the 1st century AD. What we saw was an extract from the play "History of the Goddess Quan Am Thi Kinh" with Thi Mau, an enchanting village woman from the pagoda [?]. I was caught up in the story and remember the expression of Thi Mau who was trying to seduce the young monk. In fact, Thi Kinh was disguised as a man, with her fan open or shut. I tried to do the dance of the hands with the fan that my aunt Vuong had given me. Before the performance, I practiced in front of a mirror several times and calculated the time for the entertainment.

About a dozen nuns were seated in a semi-circle in a small room. I had previously only met three of them. The setting was intimate and this gave me the confidence to speak up. I sang two contemporary songs by the musician Pham Duy, who was all the rage at that time. One was *Tinh Ca* with the opening lines: "I love my mother tongue ever since my birth. I was cradled by my tender mother." The other song *Dem Xuan* (Spring Night)

talks of the emerging love of a young girl. I was a bit embarrassed to translate the words of this song for these serious nuns. After the session, Mother Marie-Angele expressed their thanks and praised my sincerity and simplicity. I asked myself why these cloistered nuns should concern themselves with the cultures of distant lands. They had listed carefully to the story of Thi Kinh and the injustice she suffered, which touched their hearts.

My period of solitude ended with the arrival of four young Spanish ladies from Bilbao, accompanied by a grey-haired woman who was their chaperone. They were exuberant and laughed freely. The dining hall burst with voices every time they entered. I was able to join them for visits to the Grevin Wax Museum, Rodin Museum and the Eiffel Tower. Some evenings we gathered after dinner and they taught me a few words of Spanish and some folksongs. We had a lot of fun during the week that they were in Paris.

With Spanish students at the Eiffel Tower - April 1954

With Spanish students at the Eiffel Tower - April 1954 They had introduced me to the Spanish language, which came in useful years later, when I was invited to Cuba. Before I left, I learnt Spanish without difficulty and thus was able to make friends with Cubans as well as women from the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico etc. – all thanks to these popular songs from Latin America and the Caribbean.

My brother was happy to let me explore Paris with these new friends as he was very absorbed in his studies. When I had first arrived, he had taken me to the Louvre and the Discovery Palace, with two of his friends. I remember an exhibition of paintings at the Louvre. In front of a painting covered in riotous colours of orange, yellow and red, I alone knew that its subject was

war and I was right. My brother knew a lot about painting, which I did not; but I was haunted by my experiences of war. At the Discovery Palace, I was amazed by all sorts of discoveries in physics, such as cathode rays and above all radar. As a student I appreciated these museums, the exhibits of which complemented my theoretical knowledge.

Eleven: The battle of Dien Bien Phu seen from afar

Spring returned. The temperature was mild and the trees along the boulevard Saint Michel sprang into bud. Every day the Luxemburg Gardens were different. The statues placed around the big pond displayed all their charm against a backdrop of leaves.

The battle of Dien Bien Phu broke out in the middle of March and made me anxious. At the time of my departure from Vietnam, when I had noted the bombers lined up at Gia Lam airport in Hanoi and Cat Bi airport in Haiphong, I had had a premonition that the war was about to intensify. The press in Paris reported daily the progress of the bloody fight with more and more alarming headlines. I noticed that the French press paid no attention to the just cause of the Vietnamese people in pursuit of independence and their aspiration for peace. Above all they despised the fighting spirit of the Viet Minh soldiers and the patriotism of the populace devoted to the slogan: *All to the front line and all for victory*.

My aunt who lived in Thanh Hoa told us in 1953 that the whole population had been mobilized to provide food and supplies to the North-West. Those who could not go themselves donated excellent bicycles such as those of Sterling brand for the use of the civilian porters. The Paris newspapers always stressed that the French armed forces had supremacy with weapons and materiel supplied by the Americans. Above all the French had command of the air, which enabled them to attack the supply lines of the enemy to the remote valley of Dien Bien Phu.

There was much talk of the heroic defence and the brave counter attacks made by the French paratroopers and foreign legionnaires who inflicted enormous losses on the enemy. On the other hand, the efforts of the Viet Minh soldiers were always described as “fanatical” and “suicidal.” Nonetheless, the French soldiers were afraid of the sound of pickaxes at night, sounds which crept ever closer to their lines. They were surrounded, which demoralized them. The French government tried to raise the morale of the senior officers by promoting them. For example, Colonel de Castries was promoted to General in mid-April. However, I was well aware that most French people knew nothing of this war. Vietnam was far away, and they had more concern for their daily worries.

Marion had told me that she knew nothing of Vietnam, whether of its culture or of its history. The word Vietnam was connected in her mind with coal from Tonkin, plantations of rubber and coffee in Cochinchina. In truth

this war, which had cost so many lives and so much money, was of benefit to the colonials alone. From 1950 on I had heard on the Viet Minh radio talk of the activities of Henri Martin, the sailor who had returned from Indochina and distributed tracts against the war; of Raymond Dien who had laid down on the rail tracks used to transport weapons to Vietnam; both had been jailed. In the South of France there were demonstrations against this "dirty war" and protests in support of Martin and Dien.

When, after 57 days of fighting, the base at Dien Bien Phu surrendered, all illusions were gone. The French people were terribly upset. In Paris all flags were at half-mast, but the students from the Maghreb and from Sub-Saharan African were jubilant. They did not hide their joy at the defeat of the French colonialism at Dien Bien Phu. They raised the Vietnamese students aloft on their shoulders as if the victory had been theirs. This was the beginning of the end of the French empire.

After the fall of Dien Bien Phu, the French press made a big noise about Genevieve de Galard "the angel of Dien Bien Phu" who had brought succour to the wounded. She was a nurse who got stuck at the camp when her airplane was rendered out of action by the Viet Minh artillery in late March 1954. She was the only woman to have remained in the base to the end, taking care of the wounded in appalling conditions and, according to witnesses, in the underground infirmary, which was like something out of hell. When she visited to United States, she was feted as a heroine by President Eisenhower, who awarded her with a medal for her bravery.

Twelve: The joy of peace once more and the pain of separation

After the Geneva Accords, long-awaited peace returned to Vietnam. No more bloodshed. No more bombing. People could get around without fearing the air raids. No more political prisoners, arrest of suspects or torture. However, our joy was qualified by the division of our country into two parts at the 17^{th} parallel. Also, the wounds of war were terrible for both sides.

It was a shame that the negotiations could not have been held in 1947, seven years prior. I thought of the splendid and famous statue Victory of Samothrace in the Louvre, a Greek marble statue made in 190 BC and 3.28 meters high. It had been recovered in fragments in 1863 on the island of Samothrace: a headless woman, with one wing remaining, clothed, mounted on the prow of a ship, most likely in celebration of a naval victory.

It was very significant that our country would be split in two. So many families divided, even broken. Reunions that could not take place. My maternal aunt had three sons and two daughters at the time of the war of resistance, but her husband had taken her to the south in August, before she had time to see her children in October 1954, because of their political differences. So many family dramas had been experienced.

My mother followed my uncle and my maternal aunts to Saigon, worried that she might otherwise be unable to see me and my brother again and since my sister also wanted to come to France to continue her studies. For myself, I hoped to return to Hanoi to work as a teacher after three years study in pedagogy. I wished to pursue a career as a teacher. I had already failed the maths, physics and chemistry (MPC) exam. I knew very well that I would be hard pressed to earn this certificate in one year. I was worried about the future, not least from the financial point of view, as we had now lost the income from the three houses left to us by my father. I would be happier if I could get work and support myself, but my mother would hear of it. She did not permit me to return to Vietnam and insisted that I finish the remaining two years of my education.

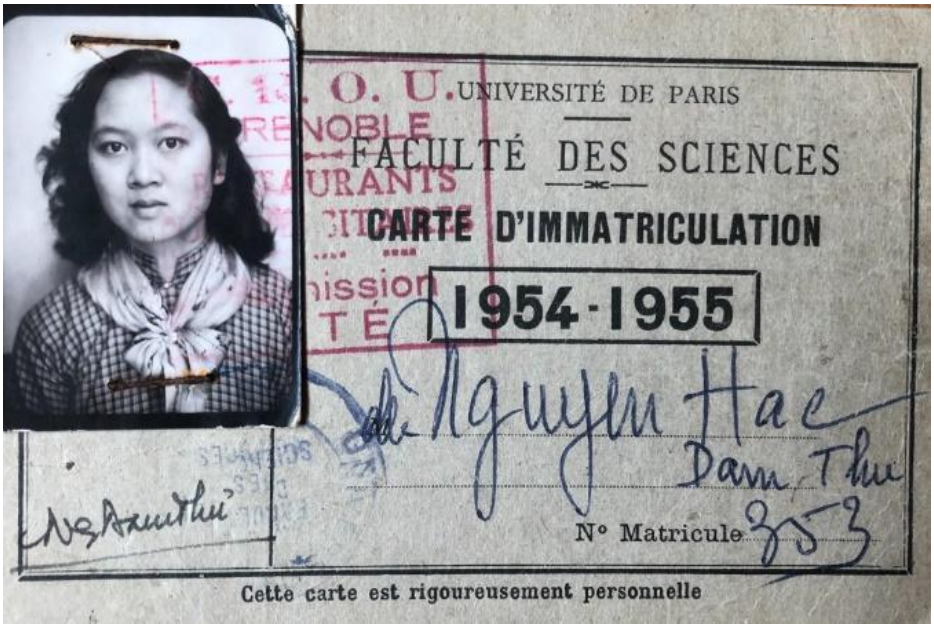
My sister had by this time joined my brother in Grenoble, while I stayed on another year at Serviam to be able to take the exams for the certificate of achievement in the first year of the science degree. I had been obliged to do a general maths course in addition to the MPC course, in order to be able to pass the maths requirement in MPC, which had double the weighting of the tests for physics and chemistry. In general maths, I chose a female tutor who had few students so that I would be able to get answers to my questions. As for the MPC maths course , which I studied with Mr. Arparian, tutor in maths (who was very strict, but, according to the older students good for the oral test), I was unable to follow him. I remember that when I first turned up for a tutorial with this man, I was timid and silent as a wooden statue; but I slowly improved and became used to his tutorials. In our seminar group, I recognized veterans of the Indochina war; these were about 30 in age and worked extremely hard.

After passing the written tests and practical examinations for physics and chemistry, I found several of my seminar group at the maths oral examination held by Mr. Arparian. My efforts were rewarded, while others were embarrassed when they flew to the blackboard to answer questions without thinking about it first. I had passed the test after five or six students had got confused and given poor answers to the questions raised, to the point that the lecturer became irritated. By good fortune I had made a good presentation of the principal and auxiliary questions and he appeared satisfied, nodding his head and saying: “Yes, yes, indeed yes” during my turn.

I got a fairly good result in the exams, but was unable to be happy about it. I was so exhausted. The price I had paid was a heavy one. My mother had been staying with my aunt for a month and was glad to hear of my achievement, as I was the only Vietnamese who had succeeded, among those who had taken the exams. In my heart of hearts, I felt that my whole being was dedicated to demonstrating that Vietnamese were neither fanatical nor bellicose, but studious. The previous year my brother had been

accepted by the School of Mining at Nancy and the School of Aeronautics at Saint-Etienne, but had in the end chosen the School of Hydraulics at Grenoble, a clean and sporting town.

With my MPC degree, I could choose either the School of Chemistry at Mulhouse or go to Besancon to become an Engineer. I sought to have a career as soon as possible in order to assuage my mother's concerns, but Marion, who continued with her studies in the Faculty of Science at Paris, advised me not to go to a School of Chemistry because of the toxicity of the products. Her mother had been a chemical engineer and had died young as a result of health issues.



Student in Mathematics-Physics-Chemistry at the Faculty of Sciences in Paris

Student in Mathematics-Physics-Chemistry at the Faculty of Sciences in Paris

However, we Vietnamese considered that since we were in France, we should take the opportunity to study engineering and so I took the advice of my brother and entered the School of Electrical Chemistry and Electro Metallurgy to become an engineer and at the same time to study general chemistry at another university in Grenoble.

I was late to matriculate owing to my hesitation in choice of schools. On the first day of school the director was kind enough to give me a guided tour of the campus, taking me to the laboratories and workshops, so that I could develop a more concrete idea of my eventual field of work. I was anxious to discover that there were no other women in the first year and only two in the third year. At the end of the visit, he asked me whether I could find work in electrometallurgy in Vietnam. I had my doubts, but what choice had I?

Just as had been the case during my first weeks in Paris two years before, I was sad and silent. I had little interest in the coursework. I took part regularly in the practical work which began at 8am. Quite a few students skipped this class, but I was interested to find out the percentage of carbon in steel with sparks of fire or to work with the microscopy of alloys.

Thirteen - A dilemma

From the summer of 1955, I had been in Grenoble with my family. We were in touch by post with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and we received letters from Hanoi, while the Union of Vietnamese in France had received many songs and poems sent from Hanoi. These made me nostalgic.

Now we were free to listen to songs that had previously been censored. Thus, on the National Day holiday of September 2nd we gathered at Saint Martin d'Heres in the neighbourhood of Grenoble to dance, sing and watch a film about the reconstruction of the Hanoi-Lang Son railway line. The children of the mayor of the town especially enjoyed the party. The music, decorations and all activities were put together by student volunteers.

The winter of 1955 was hit by a terrible period of cold weather, with temperatures as low as -16 degrees centigrade. The icy winds off the high mountains blasted through the valley. I caught a serious bronchitis and was in bed for a week, plus another week of convalescence before I could return to college. I was beaten down and anxious about catching up with the coursework, especially difficult for me as I had no friends in Grenoble. I began to have headaches, then nightmares that prevented me from sleeping. Complex and bizarre chemical formulas bounced around before my eyes in my sleep. To entertain me, my brother once invited me to a ski slope where the Grenoble Students Association had arranged a skiing competition at night, a sort of gathering of students from Eastern and Western Europe in time of Cold War.

Meeting American and Russian students during the ski competition at the Venosc Alps during the Cold War (1956)

Meeting American and Russian students during the ski competition at the Venosc Alps during the Cold War (1956)

I had the opportunity to meet students from Finland, Poland, East and West Germany as well as Russians and Americans who got on together and toasted each other with whisky and vodka. I had an opportunity to see a skiing contest at night. Each skier had a flaming torch the fames of which were reflected spectacularly on the white sides of the mountains. This is something I can never forget. Frankly, young people do not like war. Among them there is no discrimination between races, languages, beliefs and opinions. Peace and fraternity were seen as precious.

The headaches persisted, due to which I dropped out. It was an agonizing decision. I was afraid for the future. I had to face reality. I was not cut out for engineering. During the practical work I felt that I could not spend the rest of my life shut up in a laboratory looking at alloys through a microscope. In addition, they made me do a test on professional orientation with 40 questions, the conclusion of which was that, while I liked science, it was more the social and human sciences than the technical ones that attracted me.

Since my health was now seriously weakened, my mother permitted me to abandon my studies and return to Hanoi. My friends in Hanoi told me that they were very short of teachers. My life would once again be connected with youth, which I had always dreamed of when in college.

The formalities for returning to Hanoi were protracted. While waiting for my visa, Dr. Nguyen Khac Vien, president of the Association of Vietnamese resident in France, asked me to work for the newsletter of the association. I had already had one article published in the newsletter. There were only two

of us. He knew that I had already had some experience publishing an underground newsletter on a roneo machine while at the lycée in Hanoi. Thus, I no longer felt aimless and began to cheer up. Then, in July 1956, the association organized a holiday camp entitled *Thống nhất* (Unity) next to the Oredon dam in the High Pyrenees. Each region or province would be required to prepare some performance for the party at the end of the two-week long camp.

The place where some 300 students and high schoolchildren gathered at Oredon had formerly been a camp for the construction workers of the dam. A group of students, including my brother, were to travel in advance to clean the buildings. I was to join them after the commemoration of the 2nd anniversary of the Geneva Accords at Grenoble. The train stopped in Avignon. A young man in the uniform of a fresh recruit with a large backpack got into our wagon and sat opposite me. I remembered that during the Indochina war the expeditionary corps had consisted of French soldiers, European legionnaires who joined the French army to evade prison and soldiers from the colonies, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Senegal, as well as others from the French Union. During the Algerian war, which had already been raging for two years, even students doing military service were obliged to go. I had one French friend on the MPC course who had fought in Algeria for a while and wrote to me in a letter about his experiences on an expedition to a remote area under a fierce sun; the soldiers had lacked water and faced ambush.

From our point of view, the war in Algeria was a war for freedom and independence led by the National Front for the Liberation of Algeria, but in news reels before movies, the Algerians were always regarded as the fellaghas (armed partisans), as pirates and rebels. French soldiers were there simply to patrol and maintain order and maintain security. It was a repeat of what had happened at the start of the Indochina war – it was a war of attrition. In France people said that the two wars were different as there were millions of French citizens in Algeria, which was right next to France.

I arrived in Toulouse at midnight. All alone in a town I knew not, I asked the person sitting next to me in the train which route I should take before catching a taxi to the student meeting-point in Toulouse for going to Oredon. He had been a pilot in the war against the Nazis. He got around on crutches. On the platform he spoke kindly to me: “You are very capable. Have a good holiday.” With these words of encouragement, I hoisted my bag and hailed a taxi.

My South Vietnam compatriots also at the station greeted me warmly despite my late arrival. The following day, I took a train to get to Lannemezan, the last train station before the 20 km drive to Oredon. In the train an old man with white hair, realizing that I was Vietnamese, addressed

me. He recounted his youth in Vietnam, mainly in Vinh (capital of Nghe An province) where he had been a captain in the sappers and done a lot of construction. Then, he spoke of his nostalgic feelings for Hanoi:

“How is Hanoi now? The two lakes. Ah! What happy memories. I spent my youth there. Now I am going to Vienne, but I am burdened with solitude…”

I got off half-way and I discovered a pineapple that he appeared to have left under my raincoat. Unfortunately, the train arrived at my station half an hour late and my brother was not on the platform. I was told that someone had come on a Vespa, but had left only a short while ago. I was stuck, all alone in a remote corner of the mountains. I was told that I could try hitch-hiking, since the road to Oredon was popular with tourists visiting the dam, but at noon the road was deserted. Angry with my brother who had abandoned me, I set off on foot with my big backpack containing, among other things, my costume for the sap dance of the Thai tribe of the North-West of Vietnam.

The scenery was beautiful, with mountains on one side and on the other a ravine. From time to time, one could hear the sound of a waterfall; but after half an hour I was exhausted. The sun was hot, I was thirsty and hungry. Covered in sweat, I looked for a place to rest while waiting for a car. I was already familiar with hitch-hiking from the previous year when I had gone to Chamonix and stayed in a youth hostel. I had met a Finnish man who had managed to get from Helsinki to Paris solely by hitch-hiking.

After about an hour a car came, but it was already full. Another, then another, but no one stopped. I began to be anxious. Finally, I saw a big car with three passengers that approached where I was. I rushed into the middle of the road, waving my arms. This car stopped. I explained that I needed to get to the camp at Oredon that afternoon without fail. A man with salt and pepper hair and a stern appearance opened the door to let me get in and kindly asked whether I would like to join them for a tour of the dam before being dropped at the visitor camp.

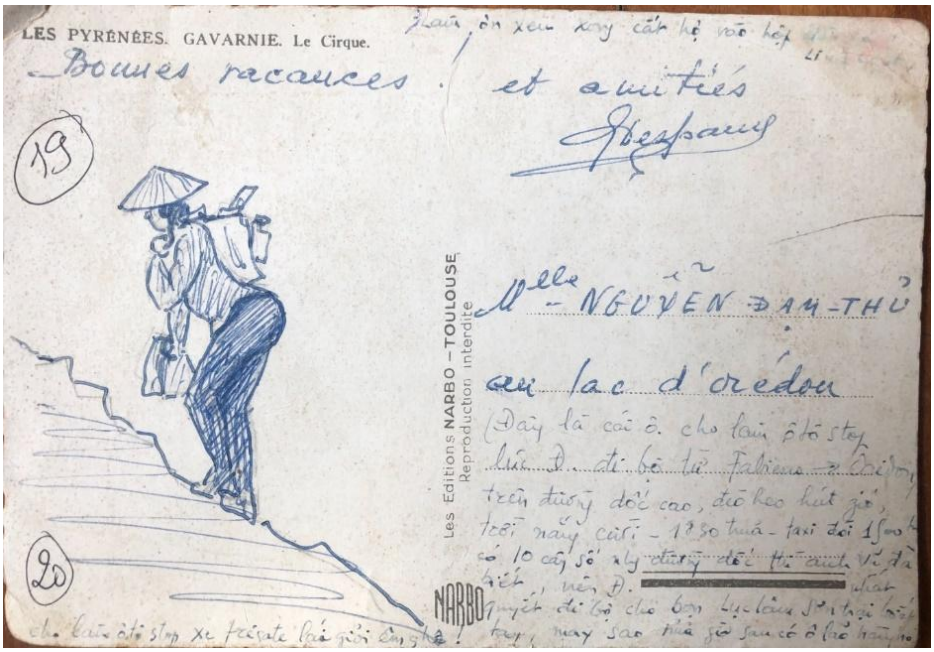
Since I had been relieved from my predicament, I agreed. On the way to the dam this older gentleman, Despany by name, told me that he had been a partisan against the Nazis, had been made prisoner and deported to Germany to do hard labour. He showed me the identity number tattooed onto his arm. He told me that fortunately his camp had been liberated by the British just in time, otherwise he would have been consigned to the gas chambers.

On his return to France, he had got into flower cultivation with some friends to make a living. As a way of thanking them and inspired by the picturesque mountain scenery, I felt inspired to sing the popular and poetic Vietnamese song *The Smile of the Young Mountain Woman*.

At the dam there were tourists, most of them American. They talked loudly, bought postcards and took photographs. The former prisoner of war kept himself apart. One of his legs was crippled as a result of the baton blows of the prison guards.

After a moment of silence Mr. Despany confided in me: “I do not like the manner in which those people take photographs, since the charms of the natural landscape can hardly be appreciated in a few minutes. I want to allow my spirit to harmonize with nature and the images to remain engraved in my soul.”

I was a bit surprised to see him buy a postcard with a stamp, but not put it in the post-box. After three days at the holiday camp, I received the card with a caricature of a young girl carrying a backpack, a conical hat on her head and in the process of climbing a mountain.



Caricature of Dam Thu on the path to Lake Oredon (High Pyrenees)

Caricature of Dam Thu on the path to Lake Oredon (High Pyrenees)

Underneath he had written: “Have a wonderful holiday, with our friendship” and the beautifully inscribed signature Despany.

I was delighted with this precious gift, so humorous and refined. I said to myself: “Sometimes good things come from misfortune.” I still have this postcard today, in the evening of my life.

We had brought together some 300 students from all over France. Most of them were from the south of Vietnam. For the first time I got a good geography lesson on the twenty provinces of Nam Bo (formerly Cochin China). Under the French administration Cochin China had been a French

colony, while Annam and Tonkin had, like Laos and Cambodia, been protectorates with a French resident working alongside an Annamite governor in each province. Hanoi, Haiphong and Danang had all been annexed by France, just as Saigon was.

Using the method of divide and rule, the French were able to sow distrust and misunderstanding among the peoples of the three regions of Vietnam. Many people from Tonkin migrated to the south in search of work as the North was overpopulated. We would come across very few people from Cochin China in Hanoi, with the exception of a few students at the university, which had been established to serve all of Indochina.

Now, for the first time, I heard students from the South talk of their nostalgia for their native provinces: Bien Hoa with its immense plantations of rubber; Long An and My Tho, the rice granaries of the Nam Bo; Vinh Long and Thu Dau Mot with their many orchards; Tra Vinh and Ca Mau with their fish and shrimp farms. We came together in all sincerity as one family, asking why the colonials and Admiral d'Argenlieu had wanted to separate Cochin China from the rest of Vietnam when he created Nam Ky Quoc in 1946. It was a total failure. We are one country, sharing the same history since our foundation by Hung Vuong, our earliest ancestor. Even those of us who had taken French nationality in the colonial period still knew the legend of Son Tinh and Thuy Tinh who had asked for the hand of princess Mi Nuong, daughter of Hung Vuong, in marriage. Out of a fit of jealousy Thuy Tinh, genie of the seas had caused annual floods to attack his rival Son Tinh, king of the mountains, who had won the hand of Mi Nuong. On one evening while we were in Oredon, we performed a fine theatrical piece *cai luong* to great applause.

After the holiday in Oredon, thanks to an invitation from the Association of Resident Vietnamese in Bordeaux and that of Marseille, I was able to visit both cities to perform a recitation of the poem *Ta đi tới* (Let's March Forwards) on the National Day of 2nd September. After hearing my performance, I was invited by the owner of a restaurant in Bordeaux to have a bowl of *phở* and she told me that the poem reminded her of her youth in Phu Tho, where she had been a seller of green tea. She had brought the tea from the region near Hanoi, via Trung Ha, to her native place. In Marseille, I had got to know a group of retired Vietnamese sailors. Most of them liked to spend their days smoking their hookahs in the Laotian manner and playing the popular game *tổ tôm* (khanhoo).

Reciting the poem “We March Forward” by the poet To Huu during the National Day on September 2nd in Bordeaux in 1956

Reciting the poem “We March Forward” by the poet To Huu during the National Day on September 2nd in Bordeaux in 1956

Before returning to Grenoble in late September I made one more visit for a week to see the grandmother of my friend Francoise Luton, who lived at Coudes, about ten kilometres from Clermont-Ferrand. The parents and maternal grandmother of Francoise made me very welcome and I got to know her brothers and sister. They took me to fish in the stream, collect shrimps and gather mushrooms in the clearings of the woods. It seems to me that I was one of their very own, returned from a long sojourn overseas.

So it was, that in early November 1956, after three years in France, I returned to my native land without enthusiasm, even with a little bitterness. I was happy to return to my country, but it was to continue my studies, when my friends in Hanoi were already working as teachers and began to be financially independent. It was only years later that I came fully to appreciate the benefits of having assimilated French culture and a basic knowledge of scientific subjects before taking on the questions of society and humanity.